

CARAVAN



TALES

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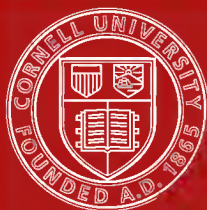
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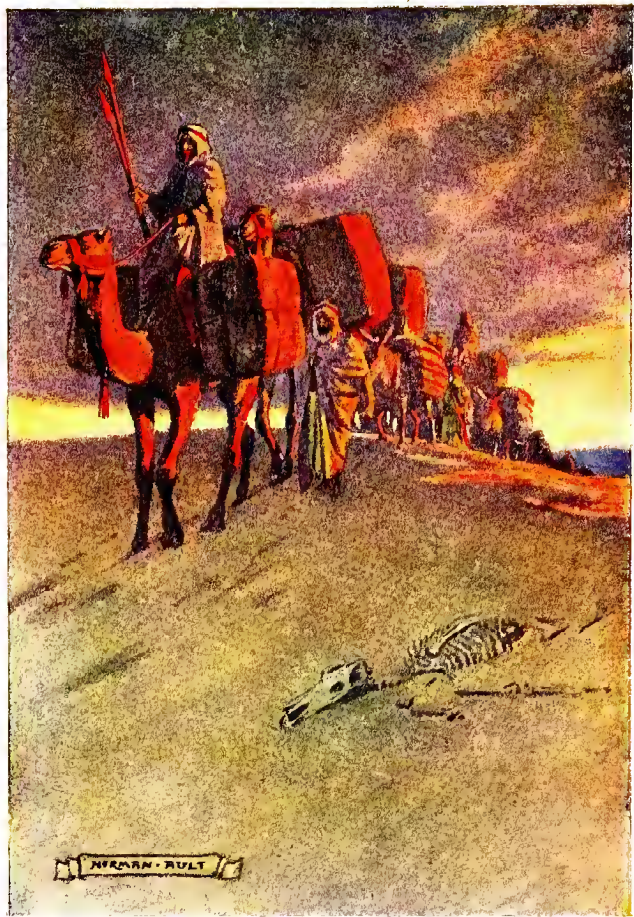
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CARAVAN TALES



"A Caravan
in the Desert."

CARAVAN TALES

AND SOME OTHERS

BY

WILHELM HAUFF

FREELY ADAPTED AND RETOLD

BY

J. G. HORNSTEIN

Illustrated by

NORMAN AULT

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PUBLISHERS



TO DONALD

THIS heading will, I am sure, be a very great surprise to you, but I think it is only right that I should in this way thank you for the help you have given towards my share of the making of this beautiful book.

It was to amuse you on our many long walks over the fields and by the river meadows of the country-side you love so well that I took to telling you about the Eastern stories here printed.

They were very familiar stories to me, not only because I had first heard them when I was a child of your age, but also because it was to become part of the business of my life as a man to read them over and over again with a whole generation of schoolboys.

The great charm about these stories was that they somehow never seemed to grow stale, and that, although they had to be read with much labour, they never failed in the long-run to arouse interest, and to repay in

To Donald

pleasure what they had cost in trouble to study and understand.

It had often been remarked to me what a pity it was that such good stories should be practically buried away in forbidding class-books, and remain unknown to the greater number of happy-hearted, adventure-loving English boys—and girls, too, for the matter of that—in these freer and better times.

But it was not till your own belated appearance in my little world gently led me back once more to the golden gates of Eastern story-land that these delightful tales began again to fascinate me; and it was your delight in them which finally inspired me to write them down.

The more or less easy task I had proposed to myself was, however, to be made a harder one than I expected by the lack of interest you showed in my work.

My stories on paper were not the stories you liked to hear on our rambles; there was something wrong with them—they were insipid and unreal.

Then it was that I put away that little blue book with its crowded pages of quaint and unintelligible characters which puzzled you so much, and wrote the words down as if they came out of my own head.

It was a bold thing to do; I sometimes felt

To Donald

it was almost a wicked thing, and there may be many who will blame me harshly for doing it, but I must not mind the worst that can be said of me, for it is the approval my undertaking met with from you which makes me hope that, although the grave and the learned may be against me, I shall have all you young and happy children to stand up and fight for me.

It is for you who can still wander so free and merrily in realms of fancy that this book is intended, and if it can please you, I shall not only have my reward, but also the happiness of having done something to spread the fame of Wilhelm Hauff, to whose genius this book owes its existence.

There is very little to be said about the life of Wilhelm Hauff.

He was born at Stuttgart, the capital of the small kingdom of Würtemberg, in the South of Germany, on the 29th of November, 1802. His father died when he was seven years old, but he was fortunate in having a wise and gifted mother, who carefully watched over him, and lovingly encouraged the talent he early showed as a teller of good stories.

He was what is called a delicate boy, and, like many such boys, he was a great reader, and was passionately fond of history, and of tales of romance and adventure. The famous

To Donald

Waverley Novels of Sir Walter Scott were his special favourites.

He passed through his school-days without attracting much notice to himself or to his remarkable abilities.

In 1820 he went to the University of Tübingen. His mother's dearest wish was that he should become a clergyman, and, although his studies were directed towards gratifying this wish, his light-hearted temperament unfitted him for so serious and responsible a calling.

When he left Tübingen, therefore, in 1824, he accepted the post of a private tutor to the children of a nobleman, the Freiherr von Hügel, at Stuttgart.

It was for these pupils of his that he composed his delightful "Die Karavane," a series of Eastern tales, the four best of which have been adapted and stand first in this book.

They were called "The Caravan," because they were supposed to have been told by various members of a great company of merchants, in order to while away the tedious hours of the long halts they were obliged to make during the scorching heat of the afternoon on their journey across the desert to Bagdad.

These caravans are still a striking feature in the overland traffic of Eastern Asia and

To Donald

Northern Africa, where vast tracts of dreary, uninhabited, and trackless wastes have to be crossed with valuable camel and mule loads of silk stuffs, woven fabrics, and delicately-wrought metal and other precious goods.

For mutual company, support, and protection against the lawless bands of fierce robbers who rove murdering and plundering in those solitary places of the earth, the traders have been wont from time immemorial to combine into big and strongly armed travelling-parties.

The success of his "Karavane" led Hauff to produce two other collections of stories on a similar plan.

From one of these, "Das Wirtshaus im Spessart," I have extracted and retold in my own way "The Golden Whistle"; while from the other, "Der Scheik von Alessandria," I have borrowed the foundation of the story of "The Wonder Child."

Hauff's "Märchen," or fairy-tales, were the turning-point in his life, and started him on what promised to be a brilliant career as a writer.

He gave up his tutorship in 1826, spent some months in travel in order to seek fresh inspiration and materials for work, and settled down at Stuttgart as the editor of a magazine.

He was married early in 1827, and was

To Donald

looking forward with happiness and hope to a life of busy and prosperous activity, when he was laid low by a nervous fever, of which he died just eleven days before reaching his twenty-fifth birthday.

The only representation of Wilhelm Hauff that I can discover to give us some idea of what he looked like is the bust, a drawing of which adorns this book.

It is a pity that we should have nothing less cold, hard, and vacant to help us to revive the image of a man whose work amply proves that he was a gentle, happy spirit, full of mirth and fun and laughter, and all aglow with the warm-hearted, generous impulses of a rich and keenly sensitive nature.

One word of apology, in conclusion, for "The Rusty Key." It is not Hauff's, but I hope that it may find acceptance as an original contribution in Hauff's manner, though perhaps a long way behind.

Hauff never knew the real East of the turquoise skies, and its glamour of life and colour. But his wonderful genius came very near to suggesting the fascination which inspired a Rudyard Kipling to breathe the longing that sings, "Ship me somewheres east of Suez," or the refrain of that famous "Ballad of East and West."



WILHELM HAUFF.

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I

THE PEDLAR AND THE POWDER

CALIPH CHASID OF BAGDAD was sitting comfortably on his sofa one fine summer afternoon. He had had a good nap, for it had been a hot day, and, being thoroughly refreshed by his little sleep, he was now in the very best of tempers and most pleased with himself. He was smoking a pipe with a long rosewood stem; a slave stood by his side, and was serving him with fragrant coffee, and ever as he sipped his cup, the Caliph would stroke his silky beard as if to show how keenly he was enjoying himself, and how peacefully he was disposed towards all the world.

His Grand Vizier, Mansor, had learnt by experience that his stern master, the Caliph, was, during the hot weather, at any rate, always in his most genial mood after his midday rest; in summer he wisely chose

Caliph Stork

the afternoon, therefore, during which to approach the Caliph on affairs of state and importance.

On this particular afternoon, accordingly, Mansor entered the royal presence as usual, but, curiously enough, and quite contrary to his wont, he looked very grave and thoughtful.

The Caliph, who was a shrewd man, noticed this at once, and, taking his pipe out of his mouth, he said :

“Grand Vizier, what is the matter with you ? You are surely uncommonly serious.”

The Grand Vizier folded his arms crosswise over his breast, and bowed deferentially to the ground as he answered :

“Lord and Master, it grieves me that I should appear sad and dejected before Your Majesty, but as I wended my way hither there stood at your palace gates a pedlar, with such beautiful wares, that I have been dolefully musing ever since how unfortunate it was that I had so little money to spare for chance purchases.”

The Caliph was really very fond of his Grand Vizier, and had, indeed, been thinking for a long time past how he could give his faithful minister a little treat. He was delighted, therefore, at this opportunity of testifying to his goodwill for Mansor, and

The Pedlar and the Powder

promptly despatched his slave to fetch the pedlar into the royal presence.

The command was quickly obeyed.

The pedlar was a short, stout man of very dark complexion, and clad in tattered garments. He was carrying a box which contained a great variety of things—pearls and rings, richly mounted pistols, goblets and combs. The Caliph and his Vizier examined the whole stock, and the Caliph finally bought the finest of the pistols for himself and Mansor and a pretty comb for the Grand Vizier's wife.

The pedlar, having sold these things, was about to collect his wares and close his box before taking his departure, when the Caliph chanced to notice a little drawer in the box, and asked whether there were anything special in its hidden recesses. The pedlar pulled the drawer out, and revealed a dainty snuff-box which contained a blackish kind of powder and a small strip of parchment with peculiar characters, which neither the Caliph nor Mansor could read.

“Don't you know anything about this?” the Caliph asked with evident interest.

“No, Your Majesty; it came into my possession from a merchant who found it in the streets of Mecca. The thing is of no use

Caliph Stork

to me, and you can have it for whatever you like to give me," answered the pedlar.

The Caliph was rather fond of out-of-the-way odds and ends of writing, so he bought the snuff-box with its contents and dismissed the pedlar.

When the latter had respectfully bowed himself out, Chasid turned to his Vizier.

"Mansor," he said, "I am curiously anxious to discover the secret of these strange characters. Can't you think of anybody in the whole of my famous capital who could decipher this mysterious writing for me?"

The Grand Vizier knit his eyebrows and gravely pondered the matter over, for he knew full well that his master was apt to be exacting once his curiosity was fairly aroused.

"Well? . . ." the Caliph inquired impatiently after a long pause.

"Gracious Lord, I think I can help you," replied the Grand Vizier, suddenly beaming into a smile.

"Speak, then!"

"Close by the Great Mosque there lives a man who is known in Bagdad as Selim the Learned. He is reputed to be skilled in all languages. Send for him. Perchance he will be able to satisfy your desire for an explanation of that quaint writing."



"The Caliph bought the snuff-box, and dismissed the Pedlar."

The Pedlar and the Powder

“Let him be fetched!” was the command.

Selim the Learned was soon ushered into the dread presence.

“Selim,” the Caliph sternly addressed him — “Selim, I am informed you are a highly educated man. Just examine these characters for me, and tell me if you can decipher them. If you can, you shall receive a new festal robe from me, but if you cannot I shall order you to be smitten twelve times on the cheeks and five-and-twenty times on the soles of your feet, for you will then have proved that you do not deserve to be called Selim the Learned.”

Selim bowed low and answered :

“Your will be done, Sovereign Lord and Master.”

Selim took the parchment from the Caliph’s hand and examined it long and thoughtfully. Then a light came into his face, and a smile played about his lips.

“The words, O Lord, are Latin,” he said with calm assurance.

“Latin, indeed!” exclaimed the Caliph. “But what do they mean?”

“The interpretation is as follows, my Lord and Master,” Selim replied, and began to read :

“Oh, thou man, whosoever thou art who dost find this, praise God for His goodness,

Caliph Stork

and learn that he who snuffs of this powder and utters the word *Mutabor* may cause himself to be changed into the form of any animal he desires to become, and will understand the language of such animal into which he is transformed. As soon as he would be restored to his human shape again, he must bow himself three times to the east and repeat the magic word. Let him beware, however, not to laugh while he is changed, for if he does laugh the mystic word will vanish from his memory and he will remain for ever an animal."

When Selim had ended, the Caliph addressed him thus :

"Be the words true or false, Selim, I am satisfied with your explanation of the writing, and I will reward you as I have promised. My chamberlain shall give you a sumptuous garment, but see to it that nothing you know of this matter shall pass your lips. You are dismissed."

Selim humbly inclined himself to the ground and departed.

"Well, Mansor, what do you think of my bargain?" the Caliph asked when he and his Grand Vizier were once more alone.

"It would seem to be a rare one, Your Majesty."

The Pedlar and the Powder

“Very rare indeed. How would it be if we put this powder to the test? It would be grand fun to be changed for a time into an animal, and to hear what goes on in a world we know so little about. What do you say to it?”

There was so little Mansor dared say, even if he would, that he was forced to pretend that he agreed with his master’s rash suggestion.

“Suppose you come round early to-morrow morning, then, and we go for a walk. If we see any creature that specially interests us, we’ll just take a snuff of the powder. It may not act, but if Selim has told the truth, just think what it would be to become transformed and understand what is being said by the birds or the beasts or the fishes!”

“There is a danger, Your Majesty,” Mansor ventured to remark.

“Not with you about, my trusty servant. It would take something to make you laugh, I know; that is why I particularly want your company,” the Caliph replied, good naturedly tapping Mansor on the shoulder and conducting him in friendly fashion to the door of the room.

Caliph Stork

II

THE MYSTIC WORD

The Caliph was young, excitable, and of an adventurous turn of mind. The thought of the enterprise he had planned for the morrow made him sleep lightly, and he was astir long before his Grand Vizier put in an appearance on the eventful morning.

“A cup of my coffee, Mansor ; it is of the best, and it will put you in good heart ! Never fear, man ! Selim is at best a humbug, though I affected to treat him as an honest fellow. Come, cheer up !”

The coffee was really very good, and being further stimulated by the Caliph's joviality and condescension, Mansor soon began to feel easier in mind. When at last all was ready, the two sallied forth alone and unobserved, and wandered into the palace gardens to see what creatures were about at this early hour.

Search as they would, however, they could espy nothing that promised to afford them any amusement, and they would reluctantly have abandoned their purpose if Mansor, who was now thoroughly infected by his master's

The Mystic Word

spirit of adventure, had not suddenly hit upon an idea.

“Your Majesty,” he said, “I know of a certain pond without the city where I have observed those quaint birds called storks, and have more than once been struck by their solemnly ridiculous attitudes and the comic clattering of their great beaks. How would it please you if I took you there?”

“Excellent! Let us go at once. We can slip out of the little gate yonder, and no one will notice us.”

The two accordingly hurried away, and were soon outside the city, whence a short walk brought them to the pond Mansor had indicated. To their huge delight, a spindle-legged stork was actually strutting staidly up and down by the edge of the water, looking for frogs, and clapping his long beak as though in mumbled conversation with himself. Looking upwards, the Caliph and his Vizier could see another stork skimming gracefully towards the pond on outstretched wings.

“I’ll wager my beard, master, those two will soon have something funny to say to one another. Shall we prove Selim’s good faith and learning by trying to become storks?”

It was the Caliph’s turn this time to reflect with caution over the proposal.

Caliph Stork

“ Let us be careful, Mansor,” he remarked.
“ What have we got to do exactly ?”

“ To snuff the powder and say *Mutabor*.”

“ Yes, that’s all very well. That’s how I can become a stork,” Selim said. “ But I don’t want to remain a stork.”

“ Then, Your Majesty, you will bow three times towards the east, say *Mutabor* again, and you will be Caliph, and I shall be Your Majesty’s humble servant and Grand Vizier.”

“ And the condition ?”

“ No laughing, my Lord.”

“ It seems simple enough, and you are the man to be perfectly grave.”

“ I hope so ; it is the privilege of my age.”

While they were thus discussing the matter, the stork on the wing fluttered slowly down to earth and was striding ceremoniously towards its companion.

“ Quick, Mansor !” urged the Caliph. “ We must not lose this opportunity of surprising those long legs,” and as he spoke he drew the little box of powder out of the folds of his girdle, took a good pinch of it, offered it to the Vizier, who likewise helped himself to a big dose, and both cried in the same breath, “ *Mutabor !*”

The Mystic Word

The word had scarcely passed their lips when their legs shrank up and became thin and reddish; their beautiful, soft, yellow slippers were changed into the crinkled yellow feet of a stork; their arms expanded into wings; their necks suddenly shot out of their shoulders, and soft white feathers covered their birdlike bodies.

"Upon my soul, Grand Vizier, what an exquisite beak you have got!" said the Caliph, astonished beyond measure by the change that was wrought in his faithful minister. By the holy beard of the Great Prophet," he added, "I can hardly believe my eyes!"

"My humble and obedient thanks for the compliment," Mansor replied, "but if I may venture to take a liberty with your gracious person under these changed circumstances, will you allow me to congratulate you on your appearance. You are even more handsome as a stork than you were as a Caliph, dread Master. But we are losing time, methinks. Shall we go and listen to our bird-mates there, and discover if we really can understand what they say?"

The second stork had meanwhile gravely approached the edge of the pond, and was daintily trimming its feet and preening the

Caliph Stork

feathers of its wings in expectation of being accosted by the first arrival on the scene.

The two new storks, though somewhat awkward in their movements, hurried as nimbly as they could within earshot, and were fairly astounded at being able to surprise the following dialogue.

“Good morning, Mr. Longshanks, I wonder what brings you so early to this meadow?”

“Good morning, dear Miss Clatterbill, I was getting a bit of a snack. ‘The early bird gathers the worm,’ is the one truth that men have ever learnt from our philosophy, eh? Well, what have you come for? You like lizards best, I think, but if you can do with a choice bit of a frog’s leg, I’m sure it would give me the greatest possible pleasure to snap up a titbit for your breakfast.”

“Many thanks, kind sir. But I have had my little bit of food, and I have really come here this morning on quite a different errand. My father is giving a party to-day; he has commanded me to dance for the entertainment of his guests. I am dreadfully out of practice, though, so I came to this field to try my steps.”

“Well, my dear, I am sure you need fear no disturbance from me, although your father has not done me the honour to number

The Mystic Word

me among his guests. Practise, by all means ; no one likes to see good dancing better than I do."

" You shall judge in due course whether it is good or not, but I will do my best," young Miss Clatterbill archly remarked, and, poising herself gracefully on tiptoe, with outstretched wings and elongated neck, she sped round and round the field in the most extraordinary gyrations.

The Caliph and Mansor, standing discreetly aloof, were astounded at the rapidity of her movements, but when she suddenly came to a dead stop and remained transfixed with one leg tucked up to her body in the most comical of stork attitudes, they both burst out together into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

They laughed and laughed till human tears ran down their bird beaks, and it was quite a long time before the Caliph, having recovered his breath, was able to say :

" Mansor, that's the biggest joke I have ever seen in my life ! Man, it was perfectly screaming, but what a pity those birds were such fools as to be scared by our amusement. I wonder what they would have done next ?"

" Holy Prophet, Master, what have *we*

Caliph Stork

done ?” Mansor exclaimed with evident consternation.

“What’s the matter with you ? Can’t you enjoy yourself for once in your solemn, matter-of-fact life and be thankful ?” the Caliph retorted, with a dim perception of the grounds for his Vizier’s apprehensions.

“Did you laugh, Caliph ?”

“Didn’t you ?”

“I regret it now.”

“Nonsense, man. . . .”

“Stork, I fear.”

“Man, if you like to think . . .”

“Think ! Let me see, how do we think ? . . .”

“Bow to the east . . .”

“Three times and say . . .”

“Yes, and say . . .”

“What do you say ? . . .”

“Mu . . .”

“Mu . . .”

“Mu . . .”

They bowed and they bowed and they bowed ; they said “Mu . . .” and “Mu . . .” and “Mu . . .” till their necks ached and their beaks refused to snap, but they had forgotten the rest of the word, and nothing they could do or say would bring it back to their memories.

The Captive Owl

“Mu . . . Mu . . . Mu . . . !” gasped the Caliph Stork.

“Mu . . . Mu . . . Mu . . . !” his Stork Vizier sadly responded.

III

THE CAPTIVE OWL

Who shall describe the feeling of those two miserable and bewitched creatures as they wandered piteously and timidly about in the most lonesome fields they could find ?

The horror of their woeful plight was aggravated by the pangs of hunger which they suffered, for there was little in the way of fruit or wholesome vegetable in the solitary haunts they frequented that they could chew with their long beaks, and they had still to acquire an appetite for such dainty but indigestible titbits as frogs and lizards.

They had sneaked about in this disconsolate fashion for some days, when the happy idea occurred to them that, shyly though they must shun the company of other storks and birds who might ill-use them as impostors, there was no need for them to hide from men, to whom, as storks, they were sacred and not to be molested. When they had therefore

Caliph Stork

exercised their wings sufficiently to make the attempt, they soared upwards at last, and flapped their way to the roofs of Bagdad.

Perched aloft, they looked down on the familiar streets and open places. How bitterly they rued their unhappy craving for adventure as they watched their fellow-men go in and out in anxious pursuit of their human avocations.

But as they watched they gradually began to perceive a bustle and commotion that was anything but usual even among so lively a people as the dwellers in Bagdad. Groups began to form at various points in the streets ; frantic gesticulations marked the emphasis of their speech ; there were fear and anger in the words that were spoken, much appealing with outstretched bare arm to the blue sky above, and wherever women and children congregated many wailings of grief and many tears of sorrow.

“ What does it all mean, Mansor ? ” asked the Caliph.

“ They are deploring your untimely disappearance, Master—and mine, too, perhaps.”

“ Oh, why can't we speak to them ? ”

“ Would they believe you if you could ? ”

“ They would hardly have me for their

The Captive Owl

Caliph, I admit, if I really do look like a stork," Chasid replied.

"You are a stork, Master. . . . But look ! What is going on at the palace ? Let us hasten thither !"

They flew on, and, settling on the pinnacles of the great entrance-gate of the royal enclosure, they beheld a huge procession preceded by drums and fifes. To their intense amazement they soon perceived a man dressed in a king's mantle and resplendent in jewelled grandeur, setting high on horseback, while a slavish crowd of hired attendants surrounded him, shouting : " Hail, Mirza !"

"Do you understand why we are storks now ?" Chasid asked, with a vivid recollection of the arch-enemy who had ceaselessly intrigued against his fair claim to the throne.

"Kashnur !" muttered the Grand Vizier, for well he knew, as the trusty servant of the rightful heir, the dangerous power that had thus outmatched his own great skill in the affairs of state.

"Kashnur . . . he was that pedlar !" muttered the Caliph. But even as he spoke, a hope, faint though it was, in the justice of his cause gleamed in his stout breast.

"Come," he said, "the crafty wiles of a bad man have been too much for us, but

Caliph Stork

righteousness will prevail if we seek it where alone it may be found. Let us hie to the tomb of the Prophet, he will understand the dire extremity of our plight. Who shall say but what he will give us the clue to that mystic word we have forgotten ?”

“You have spoken wisely, Master. Let us go and implore the only help that can relieve us in our misery,” said Mansor, and forthwith they spread their wings and flew towards Medina.

But though they flew bravely, they were still very unskilled in the art, and at the end of a few hours, Mansor’s strength began to fail, and his efforts to keep pace with his younger companion began to flag.

“Alas ! alas !” he groaned at length, “you are going too quickly for me, my Lord. I am old, and I really can go no farther.”

“Cheer up ! cheer up ! I will slacken down. . . .”

“No, Master, I am utterly worn out and exhausted. Besides, see, it is evening ; the night will soon be upon us ; and we should do well to find some shelter for ourselves before it is too dark.”

“Poor Mansor ! I am sorry for you. But you are wise to counsel prudence, and if I see rightly, down there in the valley below

The Captive Owl

us there is a ruined castle which promises to afford us a resting-place for the night."

The two then descended slowly to the building, which they found to be of imposing size and not so ruinous as they had imagined. Wandering about the rooms and passages, they were remarking on the signs the place bore of having once been a stately and splendid edifice, when Mansor suddenly stopped still.

"What's the matter with you?" the Caliph asked, for the Vizier's long neck had shrunk into his shoulders, his wings dropped, and his feathers all became ruffled.

"Didn't you hear it?"

"Hear what?"

"Oh, Master, it would be silly enough for a Grand Vizier to say so, how much more therefore for a stork. . . ."

"Well, well!" the Caliph ejaculated impatiently.

"This place is haunted!"

"Nonsense!"

"I distinctly heard something groaning and sighing."

The Caliph listened attentively, and sure enough, he, too, heard very uncanny, moaning sounds, that seemed to come from a chamber adjoining the passage in which they stood.

Caliph Stork

“How weirdly human . . . !” he remarked uneasily.

“Let us flee, Master ; it is not good for us to linger here !”

“Flee ! Never !” retorted the Caliph, impetuously dashing forwards to the room from which the noise seemed to come. The Grand Vizier shot out his beak, and would have seized his master by the body to restrain him from entering the ghostly chamber. But he was too late to do more than pluck a few feathers from the Caliph’s wing, for a brave heart beat beneath the form of a stork, that disguised a valiant and noble-minded man. Reminded thus of his own duty faithfully to abide by his Lord through all dangers, the Vizier limped painfully after the Caliph, who, reaching the door of the chamber, quickly pushed the crazy latch open, darted in, and then drew back in consternation.

It was a tumble-down, damp room, sparingly lighted by a small, barred window, close by which, just visible in the settling gloom of night, was a great big owl-like creature. For a brief second or two there was a strained pause ; then the uncanny bird came hopping joyfully across the wet, dank floor.

“Welcome, welcome to me, O blessed storks !” the bird almost shrieked, in a human

The Captive Owl

language that was their own. "Truly was it told me once upon a time that through a stork I should live to know what it was to be happy!"

The Caliph could scarcely believe such ears as he had; yet even as a Stork he could be nothing but the most gallant of birds. He therefore brought his thin legs into the most courteous of attitudes, gracefully inclined his long neck, and replied:

"Kind Owl, if Owl you are, though from your human speech I would venture to predict a fellow-sufferer in adversity, even as we are. Alas! that I cannot cheer you with any hope of deliverance, so far as we are concerned, for we, indeed, are the most abject of deluded mortals, as our story shall sufficiently convince you."

"Oh, the joy of your presence!" the Owl replied. "But speak, speak; tell me all. Who knows . . .?"

The Caliph then narrated in all its details what had befallen him and his trusty servant.

Caliph Stork

IV

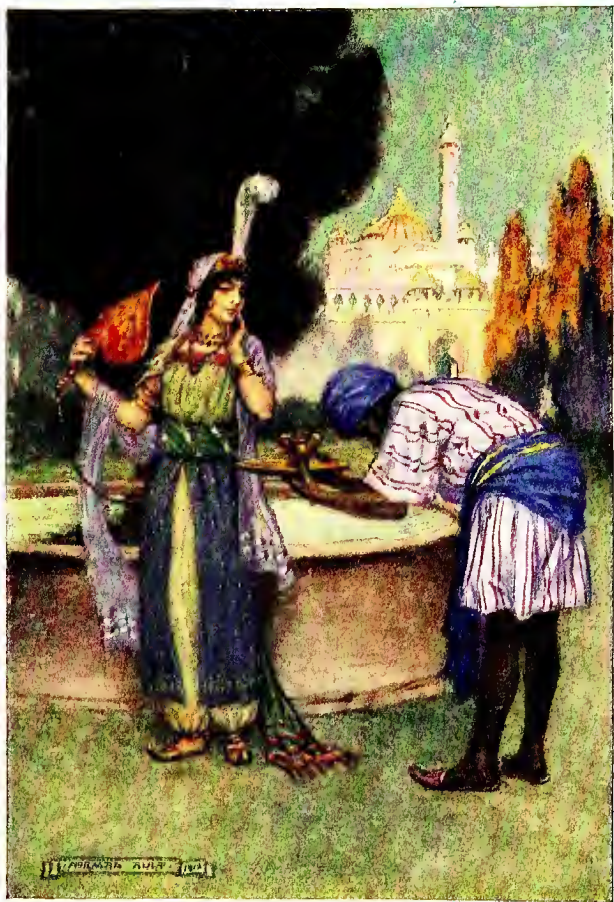
THE HALL OF THE SORCERERS

The Owl listened attentively to every word that Chasid said, and more than once did his moving account of the sorrows he and his friend had undergone bring great tears of pity into the listener's big round eyes.

When the Caliph at length ceased, the Owl daintily wiped its wet cheeks with its brown, speckled wings, and said :

“ Now hearken, if you will be so kind, to my own sad tale, and you will see that I am even as unhappy as you are. My father is a King in India, and I, his only daughter, am called Lusa. The sorcerer Kashnur, who bewitched you, is the same magician who has cast his fatal spell on me. He came one day to my father, and desired me as a wife for his son Mirza. My father was so enraged at the presumptuous request, that he caused the man to be hurled out of the palace. The wretch swore to be bitterly avenged of the insult that had been done to him, but my father, who knew him to be an ambitious and dangerous man, little imagined the kind of enemy he had offended.

“ One day when I was quite alone and enjoy-



*"I did not hesitate to drink what
the man so humbly offered me."*

The Hall of the Sorcerers

ing the cool in our garden, what I took to be one of the palace slaves came up, bearing a refreshing-looking iced drink on a salver. Utterly unsuspecting of all harm, and grateful, indeed, for a mark of such thoughtfulness, I did not hesitate to drink what the man so humbly offered me. I had no sooner swallowed the first mouthful when, to my horror, I found myself suddenly changed into this gruesome form, and fainted away in an agony of terror. I only came to my senses as the monster, now restored to himself, thrust me into this building.

“‘You are to remain here,’ he hissed with rage into my ears, ‘ugly and hateful, shunned alike by man and beast till you die, unless,’ and he laughed with withering scorn, ‘you can ever find any creature unnatural enough to ask you of his own will, to be his wife. Thus do I take vengeance on you and your proud father!’

“Months have gone by since that terrible day. Lonely and sad, I have been haunting this forsaken and ill-reputed building, an abomination to myself and a loathing to others. Nature itself abhors me, for I am not allowed even to look out on her beauty. I am blind by day, and, not being born to this condition, my poor eyes can make little

Caliph Stork

of what they see by night. But for this doubtful light and the contrast your feathers present against the darker walls of this prison cell of mine, I doubt if I should have been able to see you. Can you believe now that my lot is even more to be deplored than yours ; you, at any rate, can enjoy the relief of sight and movement."

The poor Owl having ended her story, burst into a pitiful flood of tears, which plunged the Caliph into deep thought.

"Princess Lusa," he said at length, "there would seem to be a mysterious kinship of trial and affliction between our sufferings and yours, but who shall give us the key to this strange riddle?"

"I cannot help thinking as you do," the Owl answered, controlling her grief. "Years ago, when I was a mere child, an old gipsy-woman once told my fortune, and she prophesied to me that a stork would bring me my greatest happiness. That is why I was so rejoiced to see you appear."

"How can we serve you, Princess?" retorted the Caliph. "You know full well that we are more than helpless to relieve our own sad case."

"There is only one hope, Caliph. At night, when I have been roaming disconsolately

The Hall of the Sorcerers

among these ruins, I have made one discovery. It is this. In one of the best preserved parts of this castle there is a beautiful hall, and at stated periods that vile Kashnur and a small band of the most dreaded magicians of the east, meet in it to revel and to discuss the mysteries of their craft. I have found a particular place whence their doings may be overlooked and their talk overheard. Again and again I have loitered there, on the chance of benefiting by the indiscretions that food and wine and good company might reveal to me as a way out of my misfortunes. Nothing I have ever seen or heard has as yet served me, but who knows, your own case being so recent, that you might be more fortunate ?”

“Dearest Princess, do, oh do, tell us when that man comes, and where we can observe and hear him ?”

“Gladly will I do so, but . . .”

“Speak, then !”

“You will not think me ungracious, much as I sympathise with you, but there is one condition.”

“Name it! Name it!” exclaimed the Caliph.

“You must consider me. You surely would not leave me to pine here in dismal solitude and woe.”

“Never !”

Caliph Stork

“Then which of you will undertake freely and honourably to offer me your hand and make me your wife?”

The condition gave the two storks serious pause.

“Come, Mansor,” the Caliph at last suggested. “This is a delicate question, and I am sure the good Princess will excuse us for a minute while we discuss the matter outside the room in private.”

Both storks courteously bowed themselves out, and, having closed the door behind them, they stood looking at one another for a long time in grim silence.

“You know, Lord and Master, how faithfully I have always striven, and will ever strive, to serve you, but you must realise that the present matter is outside the bounds of my ability to be of any use to you,” the Grand Vizier ventured at last most respectfully to say.

“But you must help me out of this difficulty!” the Caliph exclaimed sternly.

“I am an old man, Master, besides a married one.”

“You will not disobey my commands, Mansor?”

“I shall have no choice if you insist on asking me to do what is impossible.”

The Hall of the Sorcerers

"Impossible! What are you talking about? I can make it possible!"

"No, my Lord; you would not do me and my wife this wrong. In any circumstances, kindly reflect what the conditions of the Princess are. Our release, if haply it may be effected, depends on one of us *freely* offering the Princess marriage."

"Hm! Yes. . . ."

"Could I make the offer *freely*? You must see, Master, that you alone could honestly undertake this bargain. You are young, you are unmarried, what could be more fitting than that you should give your hand to a King's young and beautiful daughter?"

"How do you know she is young and beautiful?" the Caliph snapped out impatiently.

"I shall hope she is both, for your gallant sake. In any case, Master, for me to pretend even to comply with the condition could be of no use to us, and unless you agree to take the risks, I am afraid we shall have to remain storks."

It was some time, and not without a good deal of further discussion, before the Caliph finally decided not to throw away the chance of being restored to his human shape.

"Princess," he said, stepping reverently

Caliph Stork

into the room again, "pardon our long absence, but I come now to ask you, if you will, to do me the honour and pleasure of becoming my wife?"

"My Lord, you are making me the happiest of living creatures; may you find me worthy of your love and of your exalted station. And now that I am assured of sharing the joy of being transformed into my natural state when that joy is yours, let me lead you to the hall I spoke of. It may be that to-night we shall find those wicked sorcerers assembled."

Fluttering and flapping with painful efforts, the Owl guided the storks through many intricate turns and windings till they saw a gleam of light shining through a crack in the wall.

"They are here! they are here!" the Owl whispered hoarsely. "You must move very quietly and keep very still while I bring you to a place where you can see and hear them distinctly."

They stole along silently, and soon reached a broken doorway that led on to a gallery overlooking the hall. Gazing down, they were surprised at the splendour of the great room. Many coloured lamps lit up the painted walls and gilded columns, and shed their

“ Mutabor ! ”

soft light on a round table richly furnished with beautiful plate and laden with choice and costly meats. Reclining on a luxurious couch that encircled the table were eight elderly men. The storks quickly picked out the form and features of that cunning pedlar who had sold them the magic powder. Even as they watched him, his neighbour addressed him in a loud voice, and bade him relate how the treacherous act he had evidently previously undertaken to perform on Caliph Chasid, had succeeded.

V

“ MUTABOR ! ”

The attention of the whole party was immediately centred on Kashnur.

“ My friends,” he said, with a wicked smile on his crafty face, “ I am avenged ! ”

“ Indeed ! ” they all exclaimed.

“ Yes, the grudge I have cherished for so long against the House of Chasid is fed and satisfied ; and my son is now reigning on the throne of Bagdad.”

“ You wonderful magician ! Well may we acclaim you as our chief ! ”

Caliph Stork

“ You do me great honour, brothers of the mystic arts and hidden secrets of magic. If I can pretend in any way to deserve the rank you award me, it is in the skill I have acquired by study and practice of transforming men into beasts.”

“ We had better look to ourselves with Kashnur,” waggishly remarked the youngest of the eight.

“ By Mahound, yes ; but into what did you change that fastidious, handsome, and popular coxcomb of a Chasid ?” inquired another.

“ Guess, if you can ?” said Kashnur.

“ We give it up,” they replied after a pause.

“ Why, into a stork, of course !”

They all laughed uproariously, and agreed that no other bird could have suited the character of the Caliph better.

“ And, what’s more,” Kashnur continued, “ as luck would have it, I caught that shrewd old rascal of a Mansor in the same trap. I should somehow or other have had to deal with that loyal pillar and support of the Chasid dynasty, but the silly old thing fairly sold himself into my power.”

“ Good ! good ! Fancy Mansor a stork ! But how did you do it, Kashnur ?”

“ One of my choice powders and a pretty stiff Latin word.”

“Mutabor!”

“Latin this time; that was cunning of you. What was the word?”

“MUTABOR!”

The storks did not wait to hear the rest of the conversation. They dashed out into the passage, fluttered and scrambled as best they could into the open air, bowed themselves thrice to the east, and cried :

“MUTABOR!”

The poor Owl had the greatest difficulty in keeping pace with them, but with many hurts and bruises she just managed to be on the scene when that forgotten word suddenly worked the long-sought-for miracle on her companions in distress.

“Saviour of my life and of the life of my best friend, where are you?” cried the Caliph, in all the gratitude of his warm and generous heart, when he found himself and Mansor restored to their natural shape, and remembered with contrition that he had never given a moment’s thought to the Owl.

“I am here, my Lord!”

The Caliph turned round in eager haste. The loveliest of women stood before him to dazzle his eyes and enrapture his soul.

“Were you an Owl just now?” he asked, with bated breath.

Caliph Stork

"I was that hideous creature," she coyly replied.

"Take my hand, sweet lady, and with it all my heart. I would have honestly offered you both for the happiness you have given me. To offer you either, now that I can appreciate your exquisite charms, would be presumptuous, unless I dared to hope that you would accept me for your husband."

The fair Princess would, indeed, have been hard to please if the comely and courteous young Caliph had not instantly ingratiated himself in her esteem and affections.

It was difficult at first for the three to resume their ordinary human gait and ease of movement. The Princess, who had suffered longer than her companions in affliction, and was besides the weakest by nature, required much support and care on the long and tedious return journey to Bagdad. But the far road through dreary and desolate regions was at last happily accomplished.

The crowds that were gathered about the chief gate of Bagdad, as was their wont on a fine summer evening when the first cool breezes tempted them out of their homes, could scarcely believe their senses at the sight of their well-beloved young sovereign calmly entering his capital. No sooner had

“ Mutabor!”

they recovered from their astonishment than they thronged round him, threw themselves at his feet, and asked in wonder and amazement if it really was he, their dear Caliph, who appeared before them.

“ They said you were dead, great Master, and persuaded us to elect Mizra, that offspring of a hated line, in your stead.”

“ Show, then, how you love me by storming the palace and securing the traitor !”

In an instant there was an eager rush of thousands—men, women, and children—to the palace. The guards threw down their arms on hearing the glad news of Chasid’s return to claim his throne, and when the Caliph appeared in person on the scene, the wretched, trembling Mizra was presented captive before him.

“ Hapless creature !” said Caliph Chasid, “ if it were your own treachery that had done this, my loyal subjects should have torn you limb from limb. That fate awaits your thrice wicked father, Kashnur. As for you ”—and the Caliph felt in his girdle for the little box of powder—“ sniff this and be a stork. If you ever return to your human form must depend upon your meek conduct and on my forgetfulness of the treasonable part your weakness allowed you to play in this sorry business.”

Caliph Stork

Quaking in every limb, Mizra snuffed the black powder, and at the word of the Caliph, to the wondering eyes of all beholders, the luckless usurper became a stork.

The story of what had really befallen Chasid and Mansor soon spread like wildfire in the city. That very night an angry crowd surprised the ruined castle in the desert, and, storming it on all sides, they battered the last remnants of its decayed splendour into a heap, and burnt it and the eight old sorcerers with fire.

* * * * *

Caliph Chasid and his good Vizier lived many a happy year after their great adventure. "My Lady Night-Owl," as the Caliph affectionately called her, proved the sweetest of wives, and her royal father, whose Indian dominions adjoined those of the Caliph, made frequent visits to Bagdad, to the great delight of its loyal populace, and also to their great benefit as regards trade and the wealth that follows in its train.

As the Caliph and Mansor grew older, the cares of state and the burden of life constantly weighed more heavily on their minds, but there was one relaxation that never ceased to provoke them into a riotously hilarious mood, and that was to "play stork"

“ Mutabor !”

again, and imitate the comic seriousness with which they strained their necks to breaking-point and vainly cried “ Mu . . . Mu . . . Mu . . . !”

The Calipha Lusa and her children were never tired of seeing that performance, but whenever Chasid overdid it, Mansor had only to whisper that he would betray to the gracious lady how nearly she had been doomed to be his own wife, for the Caliph to desist from being too frivolous.



THE DEATH SHIP

MY father was a small shopkeeper at Balsora. He was not a poor man, yet he might well have been a richer man than he was if he had been of a less cautious disposition in matters of business. He brought me up according to his own simple and honest notions of what a son should be, and trained me carefully in his own methods of managing and conducting the affairs of his shop.

My life, on the whole, was somewhat monotonous and uneventful till I reached the age of eighteen, when my father began to pine, then became seriously ill, and died. Called thus suddenly to a position of importance and responsibility, no sooner did I recover from my grief at the loss of my parent, than I began to investigate the condition in which he had left me. I discovered to my great surprise that, owing to a general

The Death Ship

slackness of trade, my poor father had of late been venturing on some bold speculations, that he had been losing money in his attempts to retrieve his fortunes, and that my prospects in life were neither as safe nor as good as I had been led to believe.

Though worry rather than disease, as I now realised, had killed my over anxious father, I was young and ardent enough not to be dismayed by the situation that confronted me. I quickly calculated that if I sold up my stock-in-trade I should have money enough not only to satisfy my youthful ambition for adventure, which had been sadly restricted hitherto, but also to enable me to try my fortunes in less narrow and well-beaten paths than Balsora was ever likely to afford.

My anticipations were more than justified by the success of my sale. The shop was speedily cleared of its contents, and the only thing, if thing it might be called, that was left to me after the disposal of all my good father's belongings, was his old and trusty slave Ibrahim ; to have sold him, devoted as he was to me, would have been the crime of my life.

Poor Ibrahim shook his head rather ruefully when I discussed my plans and projects with him, but, although I offered to release him

The Death Ship

from his attachment to my person, his loyalty was not to be curbed by such qualms as he naturally felt at the prospect of roaming about the world at his age and encountering dangers and difficulties.

In due course, therefore, we found a ship in the harbour of Balsora that was bound for India; and on it we embarked in what promised to be most favourable weather. We had been on board for a fortnight, had cleared the Persian Gulf, and were standing out to sea, when signs of a storm began to gather about the horizon. The Captain was visibly disturbed by these untoward indications. He was at best a rather nervous man, and being besides young and inexperienced, he could not but view the chances of bad weather in these open and dangerous waters with some concern. The sails being reefed and all possible precautions being taken, we drifted along slowly till nightfall, when the sky seemed to be clearing and we were all beginning to hope that we had been deceived in our forebodings.

Suddenly, emerging as it were from nowhere, a big ship loomed up before our astonished gaze, and came sailing past us. Wild shouts mingled with angry shrieks and drunken yells of scorn and laughter re-

The Death Ship

sounded from the deck and hold, filling us all with a horrible sense of terror and dismay. Turning for some information about this strange vessel to the captain, by whose side I was standing, I saw that he was livid with fright and trembling in every limb.

“ My ship is lost ! ” he exclaimed in despairing accents.

“ Lost ! How so ? ” I inquired.

“ Don’t you know ? That was the Death Ship ! ”

“ The Death Ship . . . ? ” I began, seeking for information, but before I could say any more, the crew came rushing on the scene howling and crying :

“ You have seen it ! You have seen it ! We are lost ! We are lost ! ”

The panic of his men seemed to nerve the captain.

“ My children, let us ask Allah to help us ! ” he said, and, taking charge of the helm himself, he began to recite prayers from the Koran, and urged the sailors to add their fervent supplications to his.

But it was all in vain. The sky had in the meanwhile become overcast ; the wind, which had been moaning sullenly in the rigging, began to roar with hurricane force ; the waves grew higher and higher, tossing and tumbling

The Death Ship

us helplessly up and down and hither and thither ; and then, as if maddened at last that we should so long have withstood their fury, they hurled themselves at us with such tremendous blows that our poor ship shivered and groaned in every timber, and was smashed to pieces.

Beggared of all I possessed in the world, I was flung headlong into the raging sea. Agonised cries of drowning men pierced the furious uproar of the elements. In a frenzied effort to delay the horrible fate that awaited me, I seized hold of some wreckage that floated within my reach, and clung to it with the grim tenacity of despair, but my eyes were soon blinded by the saltspray ; with every gasp for breath I swallowed gulps of seawater ; my senses began to reel, and I swooned away.

It was morning when I came to, and I was in the arms of my faithful Ibrahim. I seemed to remember all at once that he had been near me on the deck during the last moments of our supreme trial, and that it was with his arm round me that I had been cast adrift in the tempest. He had hold of me still, and both of us were rocking, submerged to our chests, on the keel of an upturned boat.

The storm had abated, and the sea was

The Death Ship

calm but for the angry swell that heaved its tired bosom.

“Allah be praised, master !” cried Ibrahim, when he was satisfied that I was still living.

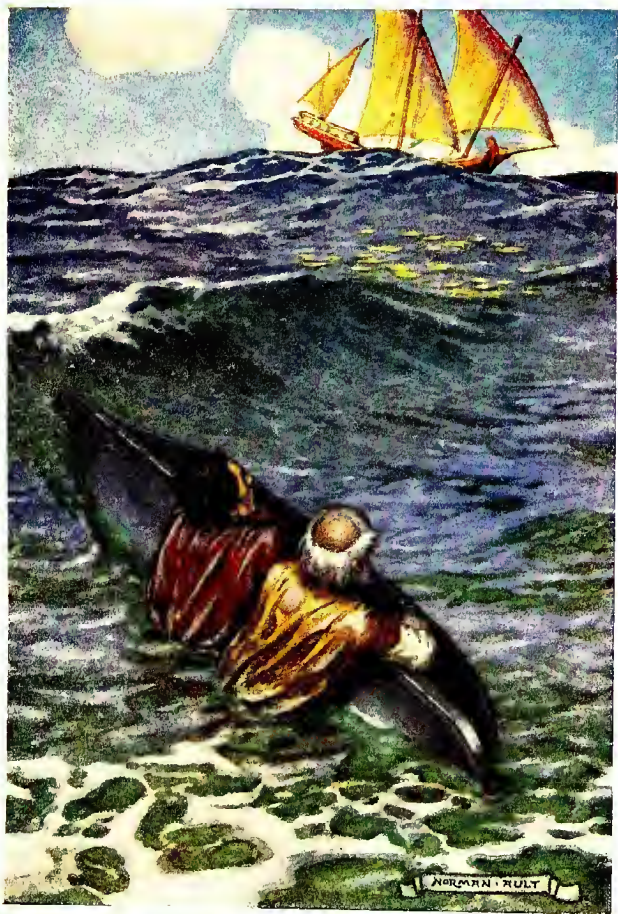
“If I am alive, my first thanks are due to you,” I replied.

“Give Allah the glory, my son, for he alone decrees the issues of life and death,” rejoined the pious old man, in all humility and sincerity of heart.

As we rose and fell on the restless expanse of waters, we could see nothing of our own ship or of the many poor souls who had shared our cruel fate ; but not very far away from us, rocking aimlessly on the deep, was a derelict, a miserable victim, so we surmised, of the awful tempest that had so suddenly overtaken us.

Of land there was no sign, in whatever direction we looked. Our only chance of life, therefore, was to propel our crazy craft towards this wreck that had so marvellously survived complete destruction.

We kicked out with our legs and shoved our boat along nearer and ever nearer to the forlorn vessel, but a weird fear began to possess us the more closely we approached it. It was a big felucca (or trading-ship), and its general lines and rig reminded us forcibly of



*"Our only chance of life was to
propel our craft towards the wreck."*

The Death Ship

that mysterious harbinger of woe that had sailed up from nowhere and dashed past us before the outburst of the storm. We tried to comfort one another that we might after all be mistaken, and hoped to the last that some human form, hearing our shouts for help, would appear and gladden us with an answering voice.

But no ; the ship was deserted, and we managed at last to paddle up to a cable that hung from its bows. Again and again we called as we clung to the rope, but all in vain. An uncanny silence brooded over the vessel.

“What shall we do, Ibrahim ?” I asked nervously.

“There is little choice left us, master. We must either get on board this ship or drown.”

Never did life seem to me to be sweeter than at that moment, and, clutching the rope firmly, I scrambled with painful effort on to the vessel. My first care then was to help Ibrahim to join me. The old man was quite exhausted when I dragged him at length over the ship’s side.

When he was safe, and both of us somewhat recovered from our exertions, we were able to turn our attentions to our surroundings.

But, oh horror ! what a gruesome sight it was that presented itself to our terrified gaze

The Death Ship

as we stood on the fore-peak and looked down on the deck ! The boards of the ship were strewn with the corpses of some thirty seamen in Turkish garb, all slashed about and mutilated, and lying in the ghastly postures of their death-throes. Fearful as this sight was to look at, it was less awful than the solitary figure standing upright by the main-mast. He was a tall, stern-looking man, richly clad, and holding a gleaming sword in his right hand. We expected at every moment to be challenged by him, but as we looked we noted the livid pallor of his face, and the rigid attitude in which he stood. He was transfixed to the mast by a great nail through his forehead !

Who shall describe the agony of mind with which we ventured at last to grope our way cautiously on to the main deck and past those awful spectres ?

At every step we took we dreaded to see that formidable-looking Captain turn his wrathful eyes upon us, or one of those many murdered men raise his head to dispute our right of trespass, but they were dead, every single man of them. We two and the ever-restless sea were the only living things in this world of horrors.

We had thus reached the hatchway that

The Death Ship

would admit us to the hold. Involuntarily we both hesitated, for neither of us dared at once to acknowledge what each of us secretly feared.

Ibrahim was the first to speak.

“Master,” he said, with studied deliberation, “something dreadful has happened here ; but for good or ill we are where we are, and what we may chance to see below must of a surety be less appalling than the terrible spectacle we have witnessed on this deck. You were the first to bring me here. May the Great Prophet stand by me, I will lead you below !”

I was not sorry to mark the old man’s spirit. Such courage was hopeful, and I followed him down the companion ladder with an easier heart than I had yet felt.

A deathlike silence greeted our steps. We put our ears to the cabin-door, but there was no sound to arrest us. With quaking hearts we turned the handle, to see a most extraordinary sight. The whole place was turned topsy-turvy. Clothes of various kinds and weapons of all sorts were lying about ; glasses and decanters were strewn about the table. The crew and the Captain must have been holding high revel when the catastrophe that ended their existence had taken place.

The Death Ship

We passed out into the hold. The ship was crammed with supplies and merchandise of every kind. There was a goodly store, too, of valuables, jewellery, precious stones, and pearls.

Dazzled by the sight of this great wealth, which now was mine, I was young and eager enough to forget for the moment what we had seen on deck and how I had come by it.

"Why so solemn, Ibrahim?" I asked, noticing how sadly my faithful servant regarded my joy.

"Of what avail are all these riches, master?" How will you barter them on the high seas, and how will you appease the shades of those dread spectres above us?"

These words gave me pause, but though wisdom comes with age, youth has its privileges.

"Let us be rid of our soaked raiment first of all," I rejoined, picking up some clothing. "Here is something that will fit you. Put it on, while I rummage about to find a garment or two for myself, and then we will eat and drink. I am pretty well famished. Wet and hungry men are in no condition to be reasonable."

Ibrahim sagely agreed that I was right for

The Death Ship

once, and it was with a better heart that he followed me in due course on deck.

More comfortable in dry clothes, and very much more comforted after a good repast, we had made up a pleasant little scheme of ridding ourselves of the gruesome corpses on board. It would be easy enough, we thought, to hurl them into the sea one after the other. It was a sickening business to be once more amid that scene of horror on deck, but you may judge of our awe-stricken feelings when we discovered that no power within us, tug and pull and strain as we would, could avail to shift any single body from its rigid contact with the deck. From the Captain at the mast down to the meanest sailor every one of these dreadful men was rooted, spellbound as it were, to the spot !

It would be difficult indeed to describe the condition of mind in which we spent the rest of that terrible day in this welter of crime and death. There was only one way in which we could have put an end to our agony of soul, but neither of us would be the first to plunge overboard and risk the chance of being saved again from mortal peril.

As time wore on, and my senses became blunted to the horrors about us, I was glad of the gathering darkness, and having accom-

The Death Ship

panied Ibrahim below, we refreshed ourselves once more with food and drink. The old man was very worn out and tired, and even as we sat and talked in the settling gloom of night he nodded off repeatedly.

“Lie down and stretch yourself out,” I bade him at length ; and fain to yield to my advice, he did so, and was soon wrapped in the deepest slumber.

I watched by his side in the cabin for an hour or two, and, having convinced myself that he was fast asleep, I stole up on deck to look at the night and the weather.

Remembering that the fore-peak was unencumbered by those ghastly corpses, I stealthily picked my way thither. The sea was still troubled, but the sky was clear and jewelled with myriads of stars.

It must have been about eleven o'clock—I judged in my ignorant way by the general look of things—and after standing about for a space of time till the fresh night-breeze began to penetrate to my skin, I sat down between a great coil of cordage and a pile of casks to watch in comparative comfort, as I hoped, for the first gleams of dawn.

But I was more exhausted than I had imagined, for, once in repose, and protected from the shrewd wind, I was gradually over-

The Death Ship

come by an irresistible desire to close my eyes. To sleep, I would say if I truthfully could, but it was a strange kind of stupefaction rather than the blissful gift of sleep which gained no my weary senses, for I could distinctly hear the waves lapping at the ship's sides and the wind lisping in the swaying and creaking rigging.

Curiously enough, as I listened with that vivid yet unreal tension of nerve so characteristic of dreamland, I could hear the sound of human voices and human footsteps. It would have seemed as if the whole ship had suddenly become alive and manned by a joyous crew, busily racing up and down the main deck, adjusting spars, setting sails and trimming the vessel in obedience to the commands and directions of a stern voice that rose ever and again above the hubbub of shout and song.

Such consciousness as I had, however, soon forsook me. In a terrible tumult and clash of arms I dropped off into mere oblivion, and when I came to myself at last the sun was high in the heavens and scorching down on me with its fierce rays.

I rubbed my eyes and looked about me in bewilderment; then bit by bit I collected my scattered senses, rose to my feet, and was soon

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gazing down once more on that horrible scene of carnage that had so appalled me on the day before—with this difference, however, that the gruesome spectacle afforded me some slight relief of mind. I could only have been dreaming, and I hurried below to see how my poor old servant had fared.

I found Ibrahim sitting in a dazed condition in the cabin.

“ Oh, master !” he exclaimed in a choking voice, when his troubled eyes at last realised who I was.

“ Well, man, what ?”

“ Let us agree to die, for I would sooner be lying in the deepest depths of the sea than spend another night on this terrible haunted ship.”

“ Nonsense, Ibrahim ! You and I were worn-out by our experiences and sufferings. We were both a ready prey to all the horrors that affrighted imagination conjures forth to disturb the sleep of tired men.”

“ No, no,” he retorted violently ; “ the terrors of the night were far too real to allow me to deceive myself. I don’t know how long I had been sleeping, but I was gradually aroused to wakefulness by the noise of footsteps overhead. Thinking it might be you, I would have dosed off again, when

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I distinctly heard the sound of many voices . . .”

“ Ha, ha !” I laughed, with an affectation of gaiety ; “ only my silly dream under altered circumstances.”

“ Patience, master ! Uncanny thoughts were far enough away from my mind, and I would have composed myself for another good sleep, when I heard heavy steps descending the companion ladder out there. For a space of time—how long or how short it was I do not know—I was stunned, as it were ; but, looking up again from where I lay, I saw the man transfixed to the mast sitting at that table, drinking and bawling at the top of his voice, and he had for his companion that other man in a scarlet dress who is lying at his feet on the deck above.”

You may imagine with what emotions of terror and dismay I listened to the old man’s words. I had not been dreaming, then. Those murdered men had really been astir during the midnight hours, and this terrible ship was haunted.

“ Must we trust ourselves to the cruel sea, to live or die as Allah shall decree ?” I asked, after a long pause.

“ There’s nothing for it, unless my grandfather, who was a man of many strange ex-

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periences after his world-wide travels, was right . . .”

“And what did he tell you?” I inquired eagerly.

“I can remember a little verse he used to quote, which he maintained to be most effective against spells, witchcraft, and supernatural visitations of all kinds . . .”

“We can but try it for one night more, at least!” I exclaimed.

“We can, my son, but I will only consent to the experiment if you promise to remain by my side, and exhort me to fervent prayer, so that I may resist the desire to sleep.”

“I promise not to leave you if you, too, will undertake to keep me awake.”

“We must not remain in this cabin, though. Let us investigate the hold.”

We examined the interior of the ship thoroughly. Nowhere below deck did we find any corpse or any sign of blood or violence. Satisfied on that score, we decided to post ourselves in a small compartment immediately adjoining the Captain’s cabin. It was an empty space, and whatever the use for which it was intended, there was nothing in or about it which seemed likely to lead to its being invaded. We took the precaution of boring several holes into the partition that

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divided it from the cabin, so that we might, if we could, command a view of what happened there at the witching hour, and then, fortifying ourselves with meat and drink, we awaited the great ordeal.

As the day wore to its close, our hopes and our courage visibly ebbed. But we had gone too far to draw back, and however they may be divided in all other respects, I was to learn once and for all that Youth and Age were never so fully agreed as on the principle that while there was Life there was Hope.

When it was dark enough to frighten us both, we finally retreated to our hiding-place and point of vantage, and, having securely barred and bolted ourselves in, we determined with a desperate access of bravery to defy the worst that could betide.

It must have been about eleven o'clock when a strange drowsiness began to steal upon us, and Ibrahim admonished me in whispers to join with him in reciting passages from our holy book, the Koran. We were engaged with fervour in these pious duties till we were suddenly startled by the sounds of movement above us. Heavy steps bestrode the deck, ropes and pulleys began to strain and creak as if sails were being hoisted. Gradually, too, human voices became audible

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amid the ever-increasing noise and commotion of a ship that was putting out to sea in a stiff gale of wind. To our horror, as we listened with bated breath and thumping hearts, there were footfalls on the companion ladder, and Ibrahim began to drone the magic words his grandfather had taught him :

“ Spirits of heaven, or hell, or earth,
Where'er you come, whate'er your birth,
Know well that Allah is your lord,
And rest obedient to his word.
Hurt not nor with your powers dismay
The creatures frail who to him pray.”

I must confess that, having once heard this somewhat trivial adjuration, the hairs of my head stood on end when I peered through one of the holes we had bored into the cabin, and saw the door of the latter violently flung open.

In stepped that tall commanding figure I had seen nailed to the mast overhead. The cruel nail was still protruding from his forehead, but his sword was sheathed, and as he advanced I became aware of the figure in a scarlet robe that followed him. The Captain—for it was clear by his general demeanour that he was nothing less—was deathly pale, and his eyes were rolling wildly. Not for a moment did our close presence cause him to pause or hesitate. He walked straight into

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the cabin, evidently in a highly overwrought mood, flung himself on to a seat, and vehemently upbraided the individual who accompanied him in a language I could not comprehend. They drank as they talked and shrieked at one another, while the din overhead became ever more fierce and continuous. Then the Captain brought his fist down on the table, so that every glass and bottle on it rang, and, bursting into a wild laugh, he unsheathed his sword and dashed madly out of the cabin, closely pursued by his companion, who likewise drew his sword as he staggered after his leader.

We breathed more freely when the two men had gone, but our mental anguish was far from being at an end. Ever louder and louder grew the noise on the deck—shouts and laughter, yells and groans, accompanied the stampings of many feet; then it seemed as if all the demons of hell had been let loose on a frenzied errand to batter the ship to pieces in their most fiendish rage.

All of a sudden, and just at the moment when Ibrahim and I, harassed beyond all human powers of endurance, collapsed in our confined retreat, everything became still.

It was not till daybreak that we dared to drag ourselves, absolutely exhausted, on to the

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deck, only to gaze again with undiminished horror at the dreadful spectacle of those corpses bound fast as they lay in their agonised death-throes to the planks beneath them.

Our one consolation under the terrible circumstances in which we found ourselves was that for two nights we had been spared alive and in our rational senses on this haunted ship.

We mused in long and thoughtful silence over the matter. Awful as our situation was, the strange Fate that had guided us into it, and the marvellous manner in which we had been preserved, appealed no less strongly to the more mature and sage mind of my old Ibrahim than to my own more ardent youthful imagination.

“We have had a horrible experience, master!” Ibrahim at length ventured to remark, after long and grave reflection.

“Yes, *horrible* indeed, if one word can possibly describe it.”

“We might, in our own misguided human way of ending all our troubles, end our sufferings by jumping overboard.”

I looked at him closely, but waited for him to speak.

“You say nothing,” he continued. “Perhaps, like myself, you are meditating on the

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example this ship affords us of the dangers that await mankind from a violent end."

"Go on; you can see further than I do, Ibrahim," I replied, after a pause, much struck by his words.

"Providence has a purpose, and, old as I am, I have no mind to thwart it with deliberation," he pursued; and then, bending an eager eye on me: "Can you face another night?" he asked.

"Yes, and more than one night, if you are prepared to meet the terrors we may have to endure with hope and courage."

"It has occurred to me, since we have been up here, and I have looked about, that we seem to be exactly in the same place as we were in when we first got on board this enchanted vessel, and yet the sails are set and we are clearly drifting eastward in the light breeze."

The rapid observations I made as he spoke confirmed the justice of Ibrahim's impressions.

"A great gale was blowing when that devilish crew revived in the midnight watches," the old man continued.

"We were certainly pitching and tossing in the most alarming manner."

"Exactly. How comes it, then, that if

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his ship is day by day being borne eastward, and night by night driven before a storm, it never reaches land of some kind?"

"The riddle admits of only one solution," replied, after some consideration. "The days and hours we take to drift in one direction are counterbalanced by the minutes during which those creatures, reanimated for a short spell, and assisted by a hurricane, drive the ship back on its course to this region of desolate isolation."

"And woe to the unhappy vessel which chances to stray, either by dire misfortune or lack of skill, as our poor craft did, into the danger zone of storm and tempest that accompanies the nightly wanderings of this accursed terror of the deep!"

The calm assurance with which the old man spoke, and the wisdom of his remarks, would not fail to have an effect upon me.

"What do you propose we should do, then?" I eagerly asked.

"Well, master," he replied in his meek and deferential way, "it seems to me that if we could only control those sails there might be some hope for us. But they are great and heavy, and I am too old and feeble to help you to lower or raise them. We might, however, gradually furl them. It will be a long

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and difficult job, but it is worth trying, and in order that no impious hands may undo our labours, we will inscribe on our work as we complete it that Name which can alone defy the powers of hell and darkness. What do you say ? We can but make the attempt, master, and see what happens."

I agreed to the experiment, but, unskilled as we were in handling ropes and tackle, it was night before we had hauled in half the mainsail, which Ibrahim proceeded to bind about with strips of parchment he had discovered in the hull, whereon he had cunningly indited the supreme titles of the Great Allah.

Beating a hasty retreat to our hiding-place, we awaited events with fevered pulses. It would be impossible to describe the frantic commotion that prevailed on board that devoted ship for the short space of an hour or so, when its butchered crew awoke to resume the toil of their troubled career in life. But when we emerged in the daylight to find them lying stiff and stark in their wonted attitude, the sail we had shortened was untouched. . .

It was, therefore, with renewed energy and zest that we worked to draw in more sail, binding it up again with the all-prevailing

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symbols, and retiring to our hiding-place at nightfall to test the result.

The hideous noise that raged above our heads would have maddened us, but for the proof it afforded of the success with which we had once more baffled the fell purposes of our murderous and enchanted shipmates.

It took us five of the longest days and most dreadful nights we had ever experienced to gain the upper hand in this life-and-death struggle with the Powers of Darkness.

Looking out on the sixth morning, I faintly discerned an unwonted blur on the eastern horizon.

I called to Ibrahim, who strained his eyes, no less jaded than mine for want of sleep, towards the direction I indicated.

"It is land, master!" he exclaimed at length, and fell devoutly on his knees.

The news was too good to be true, but we loosed the smallest and lightest of the sails to speed us onward in case we were approaching the end of our dismal voyage, and before many hours were passed the gentle breeze, assisting us, we were assured that we were being wafted towards a long, low, and sandy coast.

The night that followed was the worst we suffered. It would be impossible to relate

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the awful uproar that arose when the frenzied crew awoke to find that they were thwarted in every attempt to set the vessel in motion. The scene in the cabin was of the wildest, and, worst of all for us, of the most prolonged. How we escaped detection I cannot conceive, unless it was that Ibrahim recited his spell against witchcraft without intermission.

Happily for us the ordeal had its limits, though, when quiet was finally restored, we were both so exhausted that we sank helplessly down and slept till the sun was blazing at its meridian.

When I looked forth on this seventh day of our trial, we were steadily drifting towards a town. Ibrahim was at my side, closely following the course of the ship. As the domes and minarets loomed up more distinctly, he touched me on the shoulder and said :

“ We should do well to drop anchor now. We are quite near enough to land to row out and discover the kind of country we have reached.”

The advice seemed practical. We heaved out the anchor, were rejoiced to find that it took, lowered a boat, and rowed with might and main towards the land.

In less than an hour we ran into a river,

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and, pulling up-stream for a short distance, we reached the town. We fastened our boat to the quay-side and jumped ashore.

The town proved, curiously enough, to be Bulsar—a name that had a homely ring about it for us. We soon ascertained by the speech and characteristics of its inhabitants that it was in India, and further discreet inquiries showed that it was not very far from Surat, the port for which we had shipped from Balsora.

Ibrahim and I noted these strange coincidences as favourable omens in the strange scheme of events which Fate had so mysteriously designed for us.

The landlord of the modest inn at which we stopped to refresh ourselves indirectly helped to confirm our growing belief in the guiding hand of Providence. He was a man who had travelled about the world, and could speak our language well. When we had chatted with him for a while in friendly fashion, I asked him casually if he could recommend us to some wise and learned man in the town who had some skill in medicine or science.

His face brightened up at once as he unhesitatingly informed us that there was a singularly gifted Hakim, or doctor, who lived hard by, a very peculiar person in his way, yet for all that, one who had never been known



*"We fastened our
boat to the quay-side."*

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to err in his judgment and treatment of the most difficult cases that had ever been submitted to his learning. So unbounded was his confidence in this Hakim Muley that, although we feigned not to require the services of such a pre-eminent adviser for our wholly trivial needs, our host insisted on conducting us himself, and forthwith, to a secluded street in a mean quarter of the town, where he left us outside a modest doorway with strict injunctions to knock hard and often.

This piece of advice was very necessary, for without it we should have abandoned our quest as hopeless, and not waited patiently till the door was at last opened by a deaf old slave.

The feeble creature required no explanation of our wants, but mutely signed to us to follow him into a barely-furnished, cool chamber.

We were kept waiting for half an hour, when I began to lose patience.

"You are wrong to fret, master, for by every token that I can discern, this Hakim Muley is the likeliest person in the world to solve the riddle of our haunted ship," Ibrahim remarked very dutifully, in due course.

"Why is he so long about coming, then? Time is fleeting."

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“Genius never takes account of Time any more than it does of circumstances. This town, this house, this room, the slave, and this delay are eloquent of the reckless vagaries of the really inspired man who neither seeks to impose nor schemes to profit.”

I was musing over what Ibrahim had said when a shrivelled-up little man with a grey beard and beady nose came into the room.

“Sirs, I hear you are inquiring for me,” he remarked, peering shrewdly at us out of his keen little deep-set eyes.

“Have we the honour of speaking to the learned Hakim Muley, whose fame has been made known to us in the town?” I asked respectfully.

“My name is indeed Muley, ever ready to serve to the best of such skill as I possess.”

We bowed respectfully to one another, and then, having been bidden to seat ourselves on the divan, he took a place between us and begged to be informed of our errand.

He listened silently but most attentively to the story of the adventure we unfolded to him.

“Extraordinary—very extraordinary!” he observed, in uncommonly grave tones. “There can be no doubt about it, from your narrative, that the ship you were on is under a strange

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curse of some kind, and I must congratulate you on the wisdom you displayed in acting as you did and thus saving yourselves alive. . . . I should judge," he pursued, after a pause, "that the crew of the vessel is under a spell on account of some horrible crime. Until I have an opportunity of inspecting the ship myself, I would not venture to offer any further opinion. Where did you anchor?"

I explained the position as nearly as I could.

"The ship is safe off that strip of coast for the night. The sea there is much infested by sharks and dreaded by the people of Bulsar. The spot, besides that, is out of the fairway into the harbour. My advice to you, then, seeing the day is now far spent, is to go back to your inn and to fortify yourselves for such trials as may still await you by a hearty meal, the companionship of your fellow-men, and a long, sound sleep. If you agree to this, and think I may be able to render you assistance, I will promise to be at the quay, where you have left your boat, at sunrise to-morrow morning, with what I consider necessary for the enterprise in hand, after careful study of the matter."

I looked at Ibrahim for his approval.

"The advice is good, master," was his out-

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spoken comment, and with due formalities we retired.

Our landlord was very glad to receive us back and to be informed that we were so well satisfied with his recommendation of the Hakim as to resolve to pass the night under his roof. He fed us well, entertained us with many interesting stories, and lodged us so comfortably that, but for the punctuality with which he obeyed our instructions to call us at daybreak, Ibrahim and I would certainly have slept on till noontide again.

We hurried down to our boat, and just as the first fiery streaks of light darted upwards in the eastern sky, a huddled-up little figure, bearing a heavy basket-load of saws, hammers, and axes, dodged out of a dark, narrow street, and came towards us.

It was the Hakim Muley.

“Be as quick as you can,” he said, seating himself at the rudder, and cutting short our respectful greetings.

We loosed the boat, shot down the stream with the current, and in a short hour, by dint of hard rowing, were once more alongside that ill-fated ship.

In spite of being prepared, after what we had told him, for the gruesome sight he was to look upon, Muley was visibly appalled by

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the awful horror of the scene which confronted him in sober reality when he at last stood on the deck.

It was some time before he was able to speak, and he then suggested that we should first of all accompany him on a careful inspection of the vessel.

"I must see," he said, "if I can possibly discover any indications of what has happened here before I can venture on an opinion of how to deal with this horrible state of affairs."

We took him below, and in and out of every cabin, hold, and recess, but nothing he saw seemed to afford him any clue to the mystery.

Once on deck again, and doing violence to his natural feelings of abhorrence for the job, he proceeded with strained expression and trembling hands to examine those awful corpses one by one. We watched him intently studying the ghastly wounds, tapping and sounding, trying vainly to lift a head here or a limb there, and standing at last in complete bewilderment before that most terrible figure nailed in such cruel fashion to the mast.

"We must seek the solution of the riddle here," he said, after a long pause, and pointing as he spoke to the Captain.

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At his request I fetched him his basket of tools, but, work as he would, and as willingly as we could help him, hammer and saw, axe and chisel refused to detach the man from his rigid position. Seeing that all human agency was unavailing, Muley had recourse to his mystic skill, but his secret arts were as powerless as his workmanlike tools.

“There is nothing for it, my friends, but that you must, however reluctantly, abandon this rich prize, and consign this ship to the all-devouring flames. It would be useless to remove the valuable cargo and then burn the ship, for no blessing would rest upon you with an accursed heritage of woe, unless these unhappy men were first delivered by you from the pains and penalties for which they are enduring this dreadful doom !”

This pronouncement was a crushing blow to the sanguine hopes which had supported me during our trials and afflictions. Muley was sorry for me, and Ibrahim, as usual, ever ready to cheer and console me.

The day slowly wore on while we were concerting measures for setting the ship ablaze, when Muley, who had all along been strangely pensive and abstracted, suddenly seized me by the arm.

“How quickly can you row the boat to

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the nearest point of land?" he asked excitedly.

"That spit of land can be reached in a quarter of an hour," I replied, after taking my observations.

"A quarter of an hour there, another quarter to fill your boat with earth, and a quarter to get back in. Let us say an hour. The sun will not set till two hours after your return. Go, my son. It is a mere inspiration that directs me. We can but try it. If it fails—well, we shall be just where we are; if it succeeds, I shall have done something to justify your confidence in me; and if the wealth on board this ship can make you happy and prosperous, may it be yours."

I was not far wrong in my estimation of the time it would take to accomplish the task set me, though how dearly I may still have to pay for the supreme physical effort it cost me remains to be seen. Anyhow, dripping with perspiration that oozed out of every pore of my body, I rowed back to the ship with the heaviest load of earth that any boat could well be called upon to bear.

Muley and Ibrahim were waiting my return, and as soon as I had fastened up the boat as closely as I could to the side, they lowered buckets, which they bade me fill with earth.

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They had drawn up some twenty bucketfuls, when Muley called me to join them on the deck.

“Now, my friends,” he said, “help me to prove the value of the experiment that has occurred to me. I am going to stand by the Captain and make certain preliminaries. Watch me, for the moment I am ready I shall raise my right arm, and I then want you both, each with a bucketful of earth, to come forward hastily and pour the earth over the man. If you get on that box, which I will place near him, you will be able to empty your buckets, so that the earth falls on his head and trickles down between his body and the mast. Do you understand me perfectly?”

We gave him the assurance he required.

There was something peculiarly solemn and impressive about the manner in which he advanced towards that forbidding spectre at the mast. Having dragged the box up for our use, he then planted himself in front of the Captain and diligently began to pray. The monotonous sound of his voice rising and falling on the stillness of the scene, the curious way in which he swayed to and fro, and stooped every now and again to draw, as it were, a magic circle about himself with a low sweeping motion of his hands, imparted a

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weird and ghostly effect to the proceedings that thrilled and awed us.

All at once his arm went up, and, mindful of his strict commands, we dismissed our fears and hastened to execute his orders.

What happened can never sound half so incredible when told in words as it was to us who witnessed the astounding reality.

No sooner had the earth touched the Captain's head than his whole frame quivered into life. As we continued to pour the earth out, a great sigh of unutterable relief escaped from his lips, the wound in his forehead began to bleed, the nail that held him transfixed began to loosen, the rigid muscles of his body began to relax, and then, staggering forward a step or two, he collapsed, limp and breathing heavily, on to the deck.

"More earth—more earth!" Muley yelled frantically.

We filled our buckets as speedily as our faltering limbs would allow us, and strewed their contents plentifully on the prostrate form.

"Thanks . . . thanks . . . thanks . . ." the Captain gasped, and, as if refreshed and revived beyond measure by some healing balm, he scooped the earth closely about him.

With a sudden access of strength he presently propped himself up on his right elbow,

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and, looking about him as one who has awaked out of a long nightmare, his eyes fell upon us.

"Who has brought me here?" he asked.

He spoke as a man who was accustomed to command, yet there was an accent of entreaty about his voice which allayed fear and stirred compassion.

Muley and Ibrahim pointed to me in answer to his question.

"An Arab, by your dress."

"Yes, of Balsora," I replied.

"We are . . . ?"

"Off the Indian coast," I interposed.

"India . . . ! How far we have drifted in all those long years !"

"Years !" I exclaimed.

"It must be years, and years, and years . . ."

I gave him the date, and he looked wistfully at Ibrahim and Muley to confirm it.

"Can it possibly be . . . ? For fifty and more summers I have been scouring this waste of waters in this accursed ship, a terror to myself and the harbinger of evil, death, and destruction to all unhappy mariners who chanced to sail within the range of my nightly roving."

"How came you cursed?" I asked.

"By my own rashness and folly. I was the son of wealthy and influential parents in

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Algiers, and, like them, I might have lived to be honoured and respected in my day and generation. In the frivolous recklessness of youth I consorted with bad companions, brought disgrace on my name, and when, persisting in bad courses, I was at length disowned by my kith and kin, I embarked as a pirate on a career of crime and plunder. While scouring the coasts of Western Morocco for booty, I picked up a dervish, who, unsuspecting of my real character, asked to sail free of charge with me to his home in Algiers, whither he supposed I was returning. The idea of having such a man on board was so humorous that I shipped him along, intending to have many a pleasant joke at the expense of himself and of my rough and vicious crew. But I made a mistake with my man, whose integrity of heart and holiness of life were beyond the corrupting influences of our loose society ; and when he had at last realised in his guilelessness what we were and the deceit I had practised upon him, he never ceased to denounce me in terms of unmitigated scorn and condemnation. His steady and persistent defiance of me were not without their due effect on the more timorous-minded of my men, and my mate and I decided that, if we wished to retain our

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authority, it was time for us to be rid of him. But we were too late, for that same night a fierce mutiny broke out on the deck. Rushing up from my cabin, I charged straight for the dervish, who I knew was the chief cause of the disaffection. I thrust him promptly through with my sword, and as he fell he cursed me to roam the seas in this hell of a ship, not to live and not to die till chance or circumstances brought me into contact with the earth again. I laughed aloud at his words, and flung him overboard, but never did a man speak more truly. For hours my mate and I fought almost singlehanded to subdue the revolt among the crew, but the odds were against us, and I was seized and nailed to the mast. In the end, as you must have seen for yourselves, not a single man came unscathed out of this wholesale butchery. But we were not dead, for night by night we were doomed to re-enact the appalling horrors of our ill-fated combat, while the elements stormed and raged around us . . .”

The Captain fell back in a swoon, and Muley beckoned us to fetch more earth.

“Thanks, kind friends,” the wretched man gasped in a last painful effort, “you have done your duty. . . . Let me die in peace now, and let this youth to whom I owe my

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happy release from further torment take my ship for his reward. I dare not bless him if I would, but Heaven will prosper him, for he has been chosen to fulfil its decrees on me."

He spoke no more, and when we had stood for some moments wrapt in solemn thought, Muley bade me help him to convey the body to land for burial.

A strange thing happened now, for as we stooped and tried to lift the lifeless form it just crumbled to earth in our hands.

We had no sooner recovered from our great surprise than our anxious thoughts were immediately directed to the other bodies strewn on the deck. We had forgotten all about them in the excitement of dealing with the Captain.

There they lay, to all outward seeming as ghastly as ever, and we shuddered at the long task still awaiting us in the gathering gloom of night. But, marvellous to relate, the release of their chief from the terrible curse of the dervish had freed them, too, from the unholy ban. One by one their poor frames mouldered into dust as we sought to remove them.

We swept the remnants of what had once been human beings into a great heap, shovelled it into the boat, and rowed it to

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land for burial. Then, dark though it now was, we profited by a gentle breeze to set a sail and steer into the harbour of Surat.

In this thriving port I soon engaged sufficient men to get us into trim, and to embark with me on a trading expedition along the Indian coasts.

The good Hakim Muley stood by us till he was assured that no spell or magic would ever disturb us more ; then, refusing my offer to provide for his further wants in life, he chose a few paltry articles out of my rich spoil to remind him of a great adventure, and quietly departed for his humble home in the sleepy town of Bulsar.

Though the Captain could not bless me, Heaven, in whose power he left that care, amply rewarded me for that agony in my existence, which seems brief as I look back upon it after the years that have gone by, but which, when I dwell more closely upon it, was an age of indescribable horror that no language I can utter could possibly describe.



LITTLE MOOK

HIS real name was Mookrah, but he was such an odd-looking dwarf of a creature that everybody in the town called him Little Mook, for it seemed only proper that half a man should have but half a name.

He lived all by himself in a very large house, and for days at a time it would have been impossible to tell whether he was alive or dead, so secluded were his habits and so little did he either cultivate the society of his fellow-men or try to overcome the natural feelings of repugnance which his outward aspect provoked.

He was not only very short, but he had an immense head and the most extravagant ideas of dress. He wore the biggest of turbans to make himself look more top-heavy than ever, his little legs were swathed in profusely loose trousers, the broadest of girdles encircled his waist, and a mighty long dagger was gallantly stuck through its ample folds.

Little Mook

No wonder that if he was surprised in the streets by the boys of the town, on the rare occasions when urged by his religious duties to go to the mosque or compelled on a house-keeping errand to sally forth to market, a whole bevy of urchins would jeeringly follow him about, tugging at his cloak, or trying to trip him up by treading on his big slippers, and shouting all the while :

“ Little Mook, Little Mook,
If you can, turn round and look,
And say what son of a sea-cook
Last did touch you, Little Mook !”

Many an older and wiser man who stood placidly by and watched this cruel sport was inwardly ashamed of himself, and should have had the courage to put a stop to it ; for, although poor Little Mook cut such a ridiculous figure and bore himself so haughtily, and so disdainfully of all sympathy and protection, his worst misfortunes were not, after all, of his making, and if the truth had only been known, even the most callous boys of the town would have refrained from insulting him, and been the readiest to reverence the poor little man.

The world is always indifferent and always hard with regard to infirmity unless it be of the most pitiful nature. Experience has

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amply proved that outward appearance counts for nothing, and yet it is by outward appearance that we are all most ready to judge our fellow-men.

Little Mook's father even—the very last person on earth who should have condemned him --was bitterest against his misshapen son. But for his undisguised dislike of him, who shall tell how different the lot of the poor little dwarf might have been ? His father should have worked harder and saved more in order to spare his afflicted child, whereas he only despised the sole bearer of his name, and recklessly squandered his substance, while utterly neglecting his son's education and upbringing, so that, when he died, miserably impoverished and heavily in debt, the luckless little wight was driven to go out into the world and seek his own fortunes.

It was somewhat pathetic that he should in his generous small heart have held his father in such reverence as to beg that he might be given the clothes the undutiful man had worn before his death. Little did he care whether they fitted him or not. His father had been a tall, big man, so that, when Mook came to try the clothes on, he quickly saw that the sleeves of the jacket and the legs of the pantaloons were too long ; but this fault

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was easily to be corrected with a pair of scissors and a few rough stitches of a needle. It did not occur to him, however, that jacket and pantaloons were also too wide, and as for the girdle and turban, it surely mattered very little whether these were wound five times or twenty times round his head and waist. He thought no more of curtailing them than of chopping the end off his father's favourite dagger. Such details were not worth consideration, and when the house that had been his home was cleared of all its cherished contents, he just locked it up, put the key in his pocket, and, fearfully and wonderfully accoutred, sallied forth to court success in life.

His simple mind could not conceive the idea of failure attending his quest, and as he wandered merrily along he often stooped to pick up any bit of glass or pottery that lay glittering in the sunshine, firmly believing that his path was to be strewn with diamonds and precious stones. The world was just a fairyland to him, where everything that was bright was a joy, and everything that sparkled a promise of happiness.

Alas for his guileless fancies ! If he had never been tired or hungry he might well have enjoyed the pleasures of hope, but long walking was wearing work, and the odds and ends

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of food he could pick up by the wayside were neither satisfying nor sustaining. Two nights in the open, with the hard ground for his bed and heavy dews for clammy blankets, were not very inspiriting ; so that, when the third morning dawned, he was glad, as soon as he had rubbed the sleep from his eyes, to see the sun glinting on the roofs and mosques of a large town.

“ At last !” he cried. “ There or nowhere lies my good fortune.”

Full of delightful expectations, he quickly jumped to his feet, smartened himself up, and carefully adjusted his turban and dagger. But the town was further than the deceptive morning light had led him to suppose, and it was high noon before he arrived, famished and footsore, at its gates.

Animated by faith in his destiny, he wiped the dust off his shoes, gave his turban and dagger a jaunty tilt, and strode triumphantly into the streets.

Strangely enough, not a door was opened to receive him, and not a friendly being came forth to greet him. Up and down and in and out he walked, peering anxiously about him, till, wellnigh exhausted and famished, he would have confessed himself deceived, when in a remote street a window was suddenly

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opened, and a tuneful voice rang out in the stillness :

“ Come, come !

You neighbours quickly come !

The table is all ready spread.

Cooked is the broth, and soaked the bread,

Come, come, and eat what I’ve prepared.

It is for you, let none be spared !”

Mook shuffled along with all speed in the direction whence this hospitable call had proceeded, and soon stood outside a great house, the door of which was wide open. To his surprise, a troop of cats and dogs was pressing in, and he stood for some time wondering at this strange sight. Surely, he thought at length, such a general invitation to eat and be satisfied could not be intended for hungry beasts only, and must include a starving creature like himself, though he happened to be the solitary representative of the human species on this particular day.

He took heart of grace, therefore, and brought up the rear of the four-footed procession.

A sour-faced, cross old woman confronted him at the entrance of what was apparently the banqueting-hall.

“ Well, little man,” she grunted, as she barred his way, “ who are you, pray, and what have you come here for ?”



*"A troop of cats and dogs
was pressing into the house."*

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"I am hungry, and I was bidden to come and eat!"

"But the whole town knows that I only feed cats and dogs!"

"I am not of the town."

"Not of the town! How did you get into this out-of-the-way street, then?"

"Don't know how I got here, but I am here, and I'm simply starving for food."

"You are an odd little mite, and I could almost be sorry for you."

"You really might be if you would believe what I could tell."

"I will believe you when you have eaten and drunk your fill. The cat and dog food I have provided freely will not, however, tempt you. You shall dine with me, and tell me your story."

Here was bounty beyond what Little Mook felt that he could either have expected or deserved, so when he had amply allayed the pangs of hunger, he told his hostess, in his own natural and simple way, the exact truth about himself and his adventures.

The old lady listened attentively to his narrative, and when he had finished speaking, she said:

"Little Mook, I have a proposal to make to you. What do you say to entering my

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service ? You will not have too much to do, you will be well housed and fed, and I will also pay you good wages."

After his sorry experiences of wandering, so generous an offer could not fail to be acceptable to Little Mook, and he readily consented to the terms proposed.

The old dame was called Ahavtsee. She was a very eccentric person, passionately devoted to animals, and especially to cats and dogs. Besides keeping open house at the dinner hour for the domestic pets and homeless creatures of the neighbourhood, she had six splendid long-haired blue Persians of her own, and three or four good dogs. The cats were her particular favourites ; if they had been her own children she could not have loved them more, and it was Mook's special duty to wait on them, to comb and dress their lovely fur, to watch them, feed them, and make them comfortable on their silk cushions under soft velvet coverings.

His work was really of the lightest and he did it gladly. Dame Ahavtsee was pleased with him, and, except for not paying him, fed him liberally, and treated him well. But it was a dismally lonely and monotonous kind of life ; the old lady was often out, and rarely spoke to him when she was at home. She had

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grown so accustomed in her own house to the silent companionship of dumb animals that she could not realise that Mook was a sociable human being. As time wore on, too, and his particular charges became accustomed to him, and discovered with that marvellous instinct characteristic of the brute creation, the full measure of their odd attendant's peculiarities and limitations, they decided that he had little real sympathy with them, and that he was little to be obeyed or feared.

Much as Dame Ahavtsee loved and humoured her pets she was a severe mistress, and awed them into dutiful respect of her. When she was out of the way and poor little weary Mook in sole charge of them, they first began to be frolicsome, then naughty, and finally downright mischievous. They dashed about the house in wild playfulness, utterly disregarding of his efforts to restrain them, and in their gambols and antics they delighted to see what amount of damage they could do. As soon as Dame Ahavtsee was heard to be coming, they sneaked off quietly to their beds, and looked so blissfully good and innocent that Mook had to bear the blame for the disordered state of the rooms, and for the numerous breakages of valuable china and dainty furniture that were becoming of such

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frequent occurrence. It was in vain that he told the old lady the simple truth ; she indignantly refused to believe his story, rated him soundly, and treated him with increasing harshness.

Little Mook was very hurt and very sad, because he would have been quite satisfied to have remained in Dame Ahavtsee's service for the rest of his life, but day by day it became more evident to him that he must once more go in search of happiness and fortune. The memory of the terrible experiences he had undergone on his first journey made him naturally loath to plunge penniless again into the hard and cruel world. To be sure Dame Ahavtsee had promised him wages for his work, but she had not as yet paid him any money, and now that he had lost favour with her it was hopeless to expect that she would fulfil her obligations to him. It was not a pleasant or righteous thing to contemplate doing, still, if go he really must, what else was there for him except to help himself somehow or other to the pay that was his rightful due.

Dame Ahavtsee was, however, a shrewd, practical woman. She did not leave money or jewellery lying about ; and now that Little Mook was tempted to take by foul means

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what he could not hope to obtain fairly, he discovered how cautious his mistress was about locking up the drawers and cupboards of the house. Curiosity had never hitherto impelled him to explore the premises, but the definite object he now had in view led him to frequent investigations upstairs and downstairs, and it was on one of these excursions that he chanced into a secluded kind of attic, where he found a most extraordinary collection of odds and ends. He could not conceive of what possible use anything he saw in the place was likely to be, and casually picked up a crystal globe quaintly adorned with strange figures. It was pretty enough in its way, he mused, turning it round and round in his hands, when by some unhappy mischance it slipped from his fingers, and was shattered to atoms on the hard floor.

Poor Little Mook almost died of fright. It was the first accident of the kind he had had, and it sealed his fate. There could be no hope for him now. In their naughtiest moods the cats and dogs never strayed into the attics; he would never be able to protest his innocence of the damage they wrought with any sincerity again; there was nothing for him now but to flee from the wrath of Dame Ahavtsee.

But he felt that he must take something,

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and, looking round, he saw a beautiful pair of shoes, and by the side of them a dainty little cane, with a quaintly-carved knob. His own slippers were worn to shreds. He remembered how painfully he had suffered in his first journey on their account ; a cane was always useful against dogs if it might not serve him in an encounter with men, so he put his feet into the shoes, grasped the stick, tumbled helter-skelter down the stairs, out of the front door, through the town, and away as fast as his little legs could carry him.

Oh, how they carried him ! Never in all his life before had he run as fast and as far. It positively seemed to him as if he was being rushed along by some invisible power, and that he could not stop running even if he wanted to do so. This sense of being forced onwards at last began to terrify him. He looked down at his feet, and turned giddy at the sight of the pace they were going. What could it be ? he wondered, growing ever more alarmed. Suddenly it occurred to him that there must be some magic about the shoes he had stolen, and he cried in despair : “ Wo, wo, wo ! shoes, stop ! ” Wonderful to relate, his tired little legs gradually slowed down, and he at last fell, panting and exhausted, to the ground.

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“Allah be praised!” he exclaimed, as soon as he had recovered his breath. “I am in the race for fortune now.”

He took off his shoes, and examined them carefully. They were too big for him, but otherwise there was little enough about them to suggest the marvellous property they possessed.

“I hope I am not mistaken,” he pondered wistfully; “I should like to try your magic again,” he added, as he put them on his feet; “but I have no wind left in my body; besides it is getting late, and there is convenient shelter for my tired little self in this secluded grove.”

Mook trailed himself accordingly to a quiet spot among the trees, and lay down to sleep for the night.

Poor little man! His day's adventures had been exciting enough to make sleep very long in coming, and when it came, very broken. Fantastic visions of diabolical cats and dogs, revengeful old women, grimly animated objects of common use, chased one another through the chambers of his capacious brain, and made him toss restlessly on his hard couch.

Finally, however, a softly lulling dream brought peace to his tormented soul.

He could not remember how it came, or which of all the strange phantoms of his imagination it was that addressed him, but

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the voice was of the kindest and most soothing, and it said :

“Mook ! Be of good cheer ! The shoes you ran away with will serve you well, and will always obey your orders, if you have faith in their magic and treat them with thoughtful care. They were of no use to a woman of Dame Ahavtsee’s nature, and would be equally valueless to the majority of human kind. They were fashioned by mysterious workmanship for such as you, whom the world in its thoughtless way disregards and slights. The same applies to the cane you have brought away with you. It may be of wondrous power in your hands; and will tell you where riches are to be found, if riches can make you or any other man happy. That is a riddle, and you have still to learn that life is full of riddles, and that the greatest riddle of all is Life itself.”

The sun had been awake for some hours when Mook opened his eyes.

“Shoes ! . . . my big, big shoes !” he said, as his dream gradually recurred to his mind, “let me look at you ! . . . Is it true that you can really help me ? . . . And you, my cane ! . . . Will you tell me how I may be rich ? . . . If you can, my shoes, then transport me at your quickest to where my cane may find its opportunity !”

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He had barely time to adjust his ample turban on his big head and to cock his long dagger gallantly at his side, when Mook felt that he was moving, and before he knew how he had got there, he was in the crowded market-place of a great busy town.

The traffic and commotion were too much for the little man. Whatever fortunes other people might make by such hustling and jostling, wrangling and bargaining, excitement and heat, Mook felt he at any rate had nothing to seek or find amid such surroundings. So he wriggled as best he could out of the throng, and withdrew into a quiet side street to consider the situation. What should he do, he wondered, to earn a few pence? If his presence had aroused any notice he might have gained a little by exhibiting himself. But painful as that would have been, it was evidently out of the question. Then there was his cane; should he advertise its qualities as a wealth finder? The risk was too great. He had as yet no certainty of its magic; besides, what chances could his puny self have of defending his possession of a treasure-finding rod, if such it really was, against a world of strong men whose whole object in life was to acquire riches.

There were his shoes, to be sure, but,

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remembering his dream, he wisely reflected that it would be no use trying to barter them for food and drink and a quiet home ; the shoes might carry him about fast enough, they were not, however, intended to serve anybody or everybody in the same expeditious way.

Wrapped in sober thought, he had gone in and out of the less frequented by-streets when he found himself in a wide open space planted with trees. A white marble gateway faced him, and, full of curiosity, he approached it to discover if it led to a mosque.

He had failed to notice an imposing-looking figure very richly clad, with a formidable moustache and a whole arsenal of weapons round his waist, standing astride and arms akimbo in the doorway. As Mook, therefore, crept and shuffled along he was terribly startled to come upon this giant, and to hear his loud guffaw.

“ Well, you queer little monster, what in the name of all that’s funny has brought you here ?” the man asked, in a voice that was dreadful enough, but not altogether lacking in tones of piteous contempt.

“ I don’t know,” Mook replied, trembling in every limb.

“ Don’t know ! How did you get here ?”

“ By running, sir.”

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“ By running ! You’re a bigger liar than you are a little man.”

“ I may be little, but I can run.”

“ What else can you do, pray ?”

“ Nothing, but I can run.”

“ As fast as——”

“ The fastest man in the world.”

“ Ha ! ha ! That’s good enough, at any rate ! I am seriously minded to make you run for your life, but what do you say to having a fair race with the King’s runner ?”

“ What King ?”

“ Why, of course, the King who lives in this palace.”

“ It’s a palace, is it ?”

“ Did you think it was a gaol, then ?”

“ No—I’m a perfect stranger here. I thought it might be a mosque.”

“ Well, no, it happens to be the palace of the Sultan. He is the best of Sultans, and, to be candid with such a liar as you are, he is really fond of a bit of downright sport. Nothing would amuse him more than to see you challenge his runner-in-chief. Are you equal to it ? You will make a fool of yourself, but I don’t think you will come to much harm otherwise.”

“ I am quite ready for any test in running, but I am rather hungry just now.”

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“ Hungry, eh ? Well, come with me, and I’ll see that you get food, but you must promise me not to overeat yourself, for I am going to arrange a race for you this evening.”

Mook’s leader was no less a personage than the high steward of the royal palace. The court attendants might well wonder to see so important a man leading such a quaint little figure as Mook presented to his own official apartments ; they were even more surprised to hear in due course that the comical looking creature was being sumptuously entertained to food and drink, while his host sought an interview with the Sultan.

The secret of the matter leaked out when it was announced later in the afternoon that His Majesty was pleased to command a revel in the *meidan*, or recreation ground, that same evening, and that, among other sportive events, there was to be a race between the King’s runner and a distinguished dwarf newly arrived in the capital.

A great crowd of dignitaries and officials of the kingdom, royal retainers and palace servants were therefore gathered on the ground when the Sultan took his place and ordered the sports to begin. Entertaining though every item on the programme was,

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none provoked such a hearty cheer as the appearance on the course of the runner-in-chief, a tall, lithe, and beautifully-formed athlete, followed by the heavily turbaned, big-headed, but small-limbed Mook, sorely encumbered by his long dagger stuck in the wide folds of his huge girdle, his baggy, ill-fitting pantaloons, and his great shoes.

Here was fun, if ever fun was to be enjoyed, and the good-natured runner was the first to draw attention to the joke of the contest.

The two ill-matched competitors were solemnly bidden to toe the line; the starter purposely delayed the race to add to the ridiculous character of it; and then, as if bored at last by his own absurdities, he consented to give the signal.

Away the two sped, the runner visibly straining every limb and muscle, while Mook shot along as if he had been projected out of a cannon's mouth. Laughter died out in pure amazement; the frenzied shouts were stilled. Mook reached his goal, and was coolly standing at the winning-post while his rival was panting and labouring to overtake him.

Here was a marvel indeed, and the Sultan, with that well-known tact which endeared him to his subjects, was the first to recognise it. He stood up in his pavilion, courteously

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bowed to Mook, and loudly applauded his performance.

A mighty cheer rent the air, and when it subsided the Sultan beckoned to Mook to approach, and there, in the presence of all his court, appointed him to his personal staff, among the most trusted and select, who might eat from his table, claim privilege of rank, and ever rely on his support and favour.

Mook was now the happiest of men. Fortune had at last pitied him for his infirmities, and had favoured him beyond his wildest dreams. With a grateful heart he therefore humbly accepted the good things of life that now were his, and hoped that if he only fulfilled his duties to the generous Sultan with zeal and punctuality, he might ever enjoy the confidence bestowed on him, and live a quiet peaceable life at the court.

Poor Little Mook ! It was far from his simple mind to suspect that whatever his prowess had been, he of all people in the world could arouse feelings of envy, malice, and hatred in others.

But it unfortunately was so. His very humility was misunderstood, and the more the Sultan petted him the greater was the resentment of the stalwart court functionaries, who jealously despised him as a miserable

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dwarf, playing skilfully on the known superstitious weaknesses of an otherwise strong and manly ruler.

Mook was not without the saving grace of common sense. He was slow to judge ill, but as time wore on he began to be convinced that there were enemies about him, and that he must see to himself if he would be safe.

Unfortunately perhaps for him, having no heart to be malicious or vindictive, and thinking only how he might best reward evil with good, he was reminded of his magic cane. If it was really able to discover stores of gold and silver for him, surely, he pondered, there was still a chance of peace and happiness for him among men who valued wealth above all else in the world.

He had heard strange stories since he had been at court of a former Sultan, who in troublous times had buried a great hoard of treasure in the palace grounds, and had died without revealing the secret of its whereabouts.

These stories had not interested Mook at the time, but, calling them to mind now in his less happy hours, he would go out of an evening with his cane in his hand, and wander about the most secluded parts of the park and gardens. He had no luck, however, on

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his rambles, and was beginning to doubt the virtues of his wand and the truth of the gossip he had overheard, when, strolling homewards one night through a remote copse, his stick behaved in a most marvellously eccentric fashion. He would have gone on and submitted the curious attraction the cane had for that particular spot to further test at a more convenient time of the day, but he could not move it from the ground, and drew his long dagger out of its sheath in order to dig the stick out of the earth to which it seemed to be rooted. He dug, and dug, and dug, till at last he came on something hard. He bent down, scooped the earth away with both his hands, and presently lifted out with his cane what seemed to be the lid of a great jar. Then, plunging in his fingers, he drew out a handful of coins. These were of gold.

He knelt down, filled his pockets, the ample folds of his girdle, and even the baggy legs of his pantaloons with the treasure, replaced the lid of the jar and the earth over it, and staggered to his feet. It was with some difficulty that he got back to his room; he hardly knew how he managed the feat, but congratulated himself on not attracting the notice of the palace guards.

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If Mook had been less child-minded his best plan on realising the extent of the wealth with which he was now provided would have been to have seized his cane and, calling on his magic shoes, have bidden them convey him as far away as possible from the risks of incurring hatred and jealousy. Instead of this, he foolishly believed that favour might be bought with gold, and lavishly distributed his money among his most malicious enemies.

There seemed to be no end to his liberality, which finally became the common talk of the more envious of his fellow court attendants.

"The little scoundrel must be a coiner. I shall be wary of his gold in case it turns out to be dross sooner or later," said the head cook.

"No, no ; it's gold right enough," the chief slave-master maintained, and added significantly : "He's a wily imp of a creature, and knows how to play on the susceptibilities of the Sultan ; that's the mischief of him and what makes him so dangerous."

The High Treasurer, who had only too good cause to be fearful of all dangerous influences, and spoke from the fulness of his own heart, said, with a derisive laugh :

"The puny monster is just a downright thief."

"I'm determined to get to the bottom of

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the mystery, and be done with this horrible nightmare of a dwarf," said Korchuz, the King's Cup-Bearer in Chief, and that very night the Sultan, being in one of his most waggish moods at his meal, Korchuz had his opportunity.

"What's this long face of yours, my good man?" the Sultan asked, pushing aside the goblet that Korchuz had just filled for the third time.

"Long face, my Lord?"

"Yes, upon my word, I could believe that you were plotting to poison me."

"Heaven forfend, Master!"

"Drink it, then, to show your devotion, and may it revive your spirits if it is unpolluted!"

Korchuz swallowed the liquor at a gulp.

"That may prove what will satisfy your Majesty, but the trial to which you are pleased to submit me only confirms my worst suspicions."

"Your suspicions, man! What suspicions?"

"That I have been wretched enough to lose favour in your benign sight."

"You are talking in riddles, Korchuz!"

"Nay, my Lord, but surely the sun has ceased to shine for me when I, who have

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diligently and faithfully served you these many years, receive none of your bounty, while this newcomer, suddenly exalted beyond his deserts to be your own privy runner and messenger-in-chief, is loaded with riches from your own royal hand."

"Riches! . . . Mook rich! . . . Pray explain yourself at once."

Korchuz did explain. For fully half an hour he poured out the tale of Mook's wealth and the resentment it was provoking among the Sultan's oldest and most devoted attendants.

The Sultan grew more and more amazed as he listened.

"Does my Lord High Treasurer know of this?" he asked.

"He does, gracious Master, and is not over easy in his mind about where Mook gets his money from. The coins are mostly of your honoured father's reign, and there are evidences that the royal treasure vaults have lately been disturbed and rifled."

The Sultan's fury was no longer to be restrained. He bade Korchuz immediately fetch the Treasurer, raved at him for neglecting his obvious duty of guarding the high trust committed to his keeping, and ordered him to set a diligent watch on Little Mook,

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and daily to report the results of his investigations.

The triumph of Mook's enemies was now complete, and they had not to wait long before the foolish little man, driven by the sight of his dwindling store of gold, set out one dark evening to replenish it. He had dug up the earth, removed the lid of the jar, and was busily engaged in filling his pockets with money, when he was suddenly pounced upon and hurried into the presence of the Sultan.

The whole thing was so artfully contrived that poor Little Mook could urge nothing in his defence. He could now see quite well how vain it was to have put his trust in princes, and how true it was that riches could not help a man to happiness, but his folly had utterly undone him, and though he might inwardly writhe at his generous Master's rebukes and anger, a felon he was, and as a felon he must suffer imprisonment, disgrace, and death.

Death !

That was the hardest of the punishments which long confinement in a lonely dungeon forced him to contemplate.

Death !

Even an unhappy, misshapen, little mortal

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like Mook could find some joy, however scanty it might be, in life ! He was too young to die. To die ! Why should he die, he reflected, when he need only tell the simple truth and live. The Sultan would take his magic wand from him. What good was it to him ? In death it could not enrich him, and what, besides, were the greatest of riches to him now ? Willingly would he endure hunger and thirst, privation and need, if he might only live, and as the days went by, the mere love of life overpowered all other considerations, and he besought as the only favour that was left to him, one last and private interview with the Sultan.

It was granted to him, and, throwing himself down at the great King's feet, Little Mook told the plain story of his life, and how he had come by the magic cane and his magic shoes.

Alas for human wisdom when once the mind has been poisoned by slander !

The Sultan listened attentively to Mook's words. If ever a fault of conduct or imprudence of action freely confessed and bitterly regretted was worthy of being condoned, Mook's simple tale and burning tears should have wrung pity and forgiveness from his offended Lord. But there was to be no mercy for the little man unless he could prove

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himself to have been wronged, and though on such proof his sentence of death might be mitigated to banishment from the country, he must forfeit his cane and his shoes as the penalty of his wrongdoing.

Would his shoes and cane help him once more and for the last time he might require them, he wondered.

“Gracious Master!” he finally pleaded, “how can a miserable wretch like me assert his innocency in your sight without such strength as has been denied me by Nature, but granted to me by supernatural means?”

The Sultan pondered the matter seriously for some minutes in silence.

“You ask——”

“For my shoes and cane.”

“That is impossible.”

“Neither of them can be of any service to you or anyone else at your court.”

“Why not?”

“Try them, and prove them for yourself.”

“I will, and I consent to spare your life during the experiment.”

Mook was to pine many a long day in his dungeon cell while the Sultan tested the magic powers of shoes and cane without any results. He was forced to conduct the trials

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in secret, and well for him it was that he did so, for nothing more ridiculous could have been imagined than to see this mighty Prince shod in these ungainly shoes, frisking and gambolling about in futile attempts to run, or handling the magic cane, and poking stupidly and vainly in every nook and corner of his palace, not only in quest of hidden treasures, but in examining its virtues for betraying the spots where he knew that gold and precious stones were safely lurking.

Disheartened and disgusted by his fruitless efforts, and believing that Mook had a particular way of dealing with the rebellious things, the little man was suddenly summoned one day to appear before his Master.

The Sultan was alone in the grounds of the palace where Mook had chanced on the treasure trove. He was flushed and tired after his vain attempts for the twentieth time or more to secure any satisfactory results from the shoes and cane.

“Do you still value your life, monster?” he asked, his eyes flashing fire and his whole frame trembling with rage.

“What should a man even so unhappy as I prize more, most gracious Lord and Master?” Mook answered humbly, prostrating himself.

“Then reveal the secret of this cane to me!”

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“ It has no secret.”

“ You lie !”

“ Nay, mighty Sultan, I learnt no secret with it, for it has just been obedient to its purpose in my hands.”

“ Prove it, then !” said the Sultan, flinging the cane at the abject dwarf.

Mook picked up the cane, and slowly rose to his feet. Up and down he probed with it in out-of-the-way nooks and corners, almost despairing that it would serve him in this hour of trial, when he at last reached a spot hard by where he had first discovered gold. There it stuck firmly, and the Sultan hurried up to help him wrest it from the ground.

“ Fetch a spade from yonder tree,” he commanded, pointing to a cypress near by, where he had left various tools with which to lay bare the treasures he hoped to find. Mook quickly obeyed, and again dug out his stick, and with it the lid of another pot full of gold coins.

“ Strange ! Very strange !” the Sultan mused. “ I have been over that place a dozen times or more, but the stick gave me no indications of treasure.”

“ Pardon me, my Lord, but what is gold or silver to you ?”

“ What it is to all men.”

Little Mook

“Is there happiness in mere wealth?”

“There is happiness in possession of it.”

“Being rich beyond the dreams of avarice, you really say so?”

“I say it.”

“Then you esteem righteousness, plain dealing, and all else as of no account.”

“Riches command everything. But have done with your philosophising. True, I can detect no peculiar manner in your dealing with that cane; let me see now how you control those shoes.”

Mook could hardly believe his good fortune when the Sultan handed him his ungainly, ill-fitting, but beloved pair of shoes.

“High and mighty Sultan!” he said, discreetly retreating to a safe distance, “I honoured, loved, and respected you with all truth and sincerity. Noble and great though you are, your heart is not right. You are a man even as I am, but as a Sultan you should be an example to others, and the friend and protector of those less fortunately placed in the world than yourself. My shoes are not for such as you. Good-bye!”

The words were hardly out of Mook’s mouth before he was speeding away over hill and dale.

The Sultan had reason to curse his folly

Little Mook

at the loss of so good and devoted a servant as Mook had been. Digging up the pot of gold which the magic wand had revealed, he discovered that it was part of the great hoard which his father had buried when the country was invaded, that his Lord High Treasurer had dealt falsely with him and had been robbing him for many years, that his chief cook was privy to these thefts, that the slave-master was a tyrant and a knave, and that Korchuz, his chief cup-bearer, would have poisoned him long since if he could but have derived any advantage from his death.

Having laid bare all these wrongs and purged his court of the offenders, the Sultan published far and wide the promise of a great reward to him who should find and bring Little Mook back to the palace.

Whether the little man ever heard how much he was sought after or not, certain it was that he had no desire to leave his father's house, and was content to live a frugal existence in peace and quiet, disturbed only by the thoughtless conduct of foolish boys, rather than to undergo the risks and dangers of a naughty world in the useless search for fortune and happiness.

The False Prince



THE FALSE PRINCE

ONCE upon a time there was a young fellow called Labakan, who was learning his trade in the workshops of the most famous tailor in the great city of Alexandria.

There was something altogether peculiar about Labakan; to begin with, unlike his fellow-apprentices, he was a tall, broad-chested, well-made youth; then there was such an air of distinction and refinement about him, the last person in the world, you would have said, who was destined by nature to spend his days sitting cross-legged in a dingy workroom, breaking his back over hemming or stitching, and wearing out his eyesight with fine sewing and embroidery. And yet, strangely enough, he was by no means a bad tailor; in fact, it was most astonishing how neatly and deftly his big arms and clumsy-looking fingers could work. He seemed perfectly contented,

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too, with his humble lot, and things might have gone on well with him if only he could have been deaf to the foolish talk which he innocently provoked.

“Labakan has his aristocratic looks on to-day,” was the common remark of his work-mates, when he happened to be in a thoughtful mood.

“Anything wrong with your State affairs?” the Master had a habit of asking, by way of rebuking the boy’s mistakes.

No joke about Labakan was ever considered satisfactory without some reference to his royal look and bearing. Labakan had grown up unconscious that his proportions were more imposing, his carriage more stately, his demeanour more striking than the characteristics which distinguished his companion apprentices ; and, being but human, in spite of all his native common sense, he allowed the poison of the kindly-meant darts of satire and good-comradeship to swell and fester into wounds of arrogance and conceit.

His lapses into absent-mindedness became more frequent, for the pleasure of hearing himself described as “aristocratic.” “Affairs of State” occupied him ever more and more, and in order that he might have no doubt about the impression he created, he fashioned

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himself a very sumptuous garment of his own design, in which to attend the mosque on Fridays, and afterwards to parade the streets and gathering-places of the holiday crowds.

What balm to his soul to catch the whispered admiration of his fellow-worshippers, to overhear the subdued compliments of the passers-by, to note the fingers that were pointed at him, and to surprise the incredulous glances that were directed towards him !

"A tailor . . . that chap . . . Non-sense ! . . ."

"A tailor's man . . . that fine fellow there. . . . Why, it's a positive disgrace to humanity ! . . ."

"Did you say a tailor . . . a tailor's apprentice ? . . . There must be some mystery about him, if ever there was any truth in fairy-tales ! . . ."

This was the sweetest bit of flattery to enter Labakan's listening ears.

A mystery ! Fairy-tales !

Well, why not ? To be sure, he quite well remembered the little up-Nile village where he had lived as a boy and where he had first been taught to ply a needle, but was that puny, bandy-legged village tailor really his father ? He was a dear good soul

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and Labakan honestly loved him, but how did that wizened, dwarfish father of his ever come by a son of such stature and proportions, such gifts and graces as those which distinguished Labakan?

As for fairy-tales, was it mere childishness to believe in them? Did fairies just exist in imagination, or were they real creatures, as active as when the world was young, as freakish and as kind?

Labakan thought and thought of these things till he could think of nothing else, and day by day he grew dreamier and dreamier, slacker at his work, and prouder in his manner.

The Master noticed the change in him, watched his idle, listless moods, his careless work, and his overbearing manners. Time in his busy shop was too precious to be wasted; lazy people were otherwise unprofitable, too; consequently, he spared neither wrath nor abuse in his efforts to bring Labaan to his senses.

But Labakan was proof against the Master's rage and the ill-will roused by his arrogance among his fellow-apprentices. He was more than ever convinced that there was a mystery about his origin, and that it was part of the strange discipline he must undergo to endure

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rebuke and hatred in order that he might shine more brilliantly when he at last came by his own, and stood revealed in all the pomp and majesty of his greatness.

These and similar musings had never occupied him more absorbingly than when he was especially set to work on embroidering a gorgeous robe which Prince Selim, the future ruler of Egypt, was to wear on a great State occasion.

The Master wondered to see the care and industry with which he worked. It seemed as if he could not tire at the job, and for nights and nights, long after the others had left the shop, Labakan was nimbly sewing away at the marvellous patterns which his taste and skill had designed and elaborated, to cover the yoke and sleeves of the garment.

What the Master did not see was the pride with which Labakan nightly fitted the splendid robe on himself, and the airs and graces with which he posed before the looking-glasses, or strutted up and down the long workroom, converted by a glowing imagination into the State apartment of a King's palace.

How exactly and beautifully the thing fitted him, and how much better it became him? with his fine cast of features, than it suited the hollow-eyed, surly-faced real Prince Selim !

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Was it the fairies of his high destiny who kept urging him on, or the infatuation of a misguided spirit which prompted him to flee with the robe, and put his fate once and for all to the test ?

He did not know ; he could not know ; but flee he did one night, away and away, beyond the gates of Alexandria and out into strange and unknown regions. The day dawned surprising him in lone places ; and on and on he wandered, till he came among men who marvelled to meet so majestic and stately a figure a-foot on the high road. He heard them talking about him, admiring him, questioning one another as to who he could be, and ever debating the problem as to why he was content to walk. He felt in his pockets, and was glad to find that in his haste to escape from the tailor's, he had not forgotten to take his meagre savings with him. In the first town he came to, he, therefore, bought himself a horse. It was a quiet, rather decrepit old beast, but he gladly reflected that no other horse could for the time being have suited him better, since with all his fine robe and finer air, he knew but little of horsemanship, and a mettlesome, showy animal would soon have laid his honour in the dust.

One fine morning, as he was slowly plodding

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along on the sorry steed he had named Moorva, he was overtaken by a young gallant, who bade him "good-morrow" in a friendly way, and seemed inclined to be talkative. Labakan was well-disposed to be amiable, for he was rather tired of his own company, and the stranger was a good-looking, well-dressed, and smartly-mounted fellow, with whom it would be to his credit to travel.

The new acquaintance turned out to be of the chattiest and most communicative. He said his name was Omar, that his present object in travelling was to while away time, though he was in the main directing his course towards a definite goal, where he hoped to learn something of importance to his future.

Labakan was captivated by the man's candour, and much struck by the peculiar errand on which he was bent. Prudence naturally counselled him to be very reticent about his own affairs, but he gave himself out to be of noble birth, with great prospects in life, and he talked so glibly, that Omar took a fancy to him, and was delighted to have him for a travelling companion.

Before many days were over, the two had become fast friends, though in the case of Labakan, very selfish motives were at the bottom of his feelings. Omar was rich and

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generous with his money, besides, Omar had a secret which Labakan could somehow not help connecting with his own mysterious destiny. He cunningly tried many little tricks to gain the knowledge he desired, but Omar was too high-minded to be even suspicious of him, and it was not till the time came when he foresaw the necessity of separating from Labakan that he freely and openly told him the true story of his life.

It was one hot summer afternoon, when they were resting in a cool, shady grove, and Omar was for once rather sad and silent.

Labakan had upbraided him for his melancholy.

“Well, my good friend,” Omar said at last, “if I really am dull and uncompanionable, it is for thinking of you.”

“How so? I should grieve more than words can express to make your shortest moment unhappy.”

“I know you would! It is not through any action of yours that I have cause to sorrow, but owing to the circumstance that to-morrow morning we must part.”

“Why part?”

“Because I am within four days of the end of all my journeyings, and I must hasten forward and alone to my fate.”

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“What fate?”

“Well, I can tell you now, for surely you have proved yourself a trusty companion, though, strictly speaking, I ought to tell no one about my strange history. . . . I have never known father or mother, but was brought up to believe myself the nephew of Elfi Pasha of Cairo.”

“Elfi Pasha!” Labakan exclaimed with unguarded surprise.

“Ah! I see you have heard of that great and good man, whose overthrow and murder his enemies plotted. No better, kinder, or wiser man than he ever lived, and when he was carried home, stabbed with many wounds and dying, he sent for me, and told me in strict secrecy that I was in no way a relative of his; but that I was the son and heir of a mighty King, who was his own greatest friend and protector. An evil star had attended my birth, and the astrologers of my father’s kingdom had cast my horoscope in terrible times, unless I was sent away from my home and kept out of the country of my origin, till my twenty-first birthday. On that anniversary I was to go to the pillar of El Serujah, eastwards, on the boundaries of the desert of Arabia, and with this dagger in my hand, I was fearlessly to approach whoever it was

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who met me, and say : ‘ Here I am whom ye seek !’ If the reply was, ‘ Praised be the Prophet !’ I was to be led straightway to the man who was my father, and all would be well with me. Elfi Pasha told me this, blessed me, and died in my arms. For months I have been roaming the waste places of the land, waiting for the fateful day to arrive. Yours is the only comradeship that has cheered me, perhaps because, if I may be allowed to guess, like me, you are waiting to come by your own. Let me wish you success ; who knows how we shall meet again ? Meanwhile, remember me, and let us now be happy for the few hours we are together.”

It was a generous speech, and Omar made a brave show of cheerfulness, which Labakan found it hard to imitate, for dark thoughts were seething in his jealous brain.

How dark they were he did not know, till he awoke the following morning with the first faint glimmer of the dawn. Close beside him, wrapped in the deepest sleep, that was doubtless lulled by pleasant dreams of his future, lay Omar, with the hilt of the dagger which was to be the token of his recognition peeping out of the folds of his loosened girdle.

A mad impulse suddenly seized on Labakan ; he sprang lightly to his feet, stealthily reached

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forward, and deftly snatched up the precious dagger. For one horrible moment the glittering blade was poised in the air ready to be plunged into Omar's breast, but he slept so well that even Labakan's base nature, inflamed by all its lust and passion for power and place, recoiled from so gross an act of treachery. He slunk cautiously away instead to the place in the open where the horses had been tethered for the night, saddled and bridled Omar's steed, on which he quickly mounted, and, dragging his own wretched hack after him, made off with all haste across the rolling plain.

Not till the sun was high up in the heavens, and he had traversed many miles, did he consider it safe to set Moorva free. The old beast only hampered his swifter movements, and even if Omar chanced upon the horse now, it could hardly help him to make up for lost time.

On and on Labakan sped, urged by all the demons of pride and ambition to be a fearless, though ungainly, rider. He knew the trysting place, El Serujah, well, through hearing much about it from stories told by an Arab apprentice in the tailor's workshop ; and, though he had four whole days from the time he had started to reach it, the great lonely pillar

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loomed up in the desert before his astonished eyes on the third evening of his headlong ride.

A grove of palm-trees and a bubbling spring within sight of the lofty landmark invited him to repose and reflection. He was exhausted enough to be glad of a rest, but it was some time before his thoughts would grant him the calm of mind with which to enjoy it. If he slept at all, it was only in fitful, broken snatches, till soothing voices began to whisper to his troubled heart that he was a fool to vex himself. Had he not always suspected a great mystery about his fate, they said, and here was the mystery solved to his unthinking consciousness. He was Omar; that other ought to have been the tailor's man. A wicked fairy had somehow interchanged the two, conveying the one to Elfi Pasha, and him, the rightful inheritor of greatness, to a mean hut in a lowly village. How dark and inscrutable were the ways of destiny! Else, why should he ever have been forced into the unsought companionship of that other, and in one supreme moment of inspiration have been prompted against all the first instincts of his meek human nature to wrest his fate from the grudging hand of circumstance?

Waking, thus refreshed in spirit and strengthened in purpose, Labakan gazed intently at

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El Serujah on the fourth morning of his adventure.

The tall pillar stands alone on a great artificial mound in a wild and barren tract on the confines of the Arabian desert. As Labakan looked, he soon saw a great procession of horses and camels appearing on the eastern horizon. Arriving at the foot of the mound the vast array of men and beasts came to a standstill, and a scene of bustle and commotion ensued. Men were running to and fro, unloading and pitching splendid tents, and making every preparation for what was obviously to be an occasion of great pomp and ceremony. Presently a number of stately-garbed personages detached themselves from the general concourse on the plain, and proceeded to ascend the mound, ranging themselves as they went into ever-shortening lines on either side of a broad gangway. At the top of this animated triangle, and sitting at the base of the pillar itself, was a solitary figure. It was a marvellous sight, and as Labakan looked, he began to perceive that all movement had ceased, and that the imposing assembly was waiting as if in hushed expectation for something to happen.

There was no possibility of mistaking the import of that solemn and anxious pause.

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Just for one short moment his better self shrank from the cruel deceit he was tempted to practise, but the voice of ambition goaded him on. The die was cast. Had he not been the true Omar, would capricious Fortune or relentless Fate have brought him to that supreme crisis? He flung himself on to his horse, took his courage in both hands, spurred the animal into a gallop, and brought it gallantly up on its haunches in front of the long line which barred his further progress. With a dash that surprised no one more than himself, he was on his feet, and throwing the reins to the wind, he defiantly made straight for the open passage to the summit of the mound. He had not gone many paces, when two lusty stalwarts barred his way. He looked them up and down with his most supercilious air and, drawing the dagger from his side, he exclaimed, as he presented it to them :

“ Here I am, whom ye seek !”

“ Praised be the Prophet !” they replied, ranging themselves meekly on either side of him, and escorting him with every sign of deference, up past the admiring lines of spectators, into the presence of the noble old man who was sitting on the steps of the pillar.

“ Your name, friend ?”

“ Omar, my father !” was the answer, and



*"He rushed forward, clasp-
ing the great Chief's knees."*



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spreading out his arms, he rushed forward, and fell, clasping the great chief's knees.

The latter bent his head lovingly over him, completely mastered for a brief space by his emotions ; then, rising slowly to his feet, he raised the prostrate form of his son, and there, in the sight of all that glittering throng of statesmen, courtiers, and officials, touched to tears by the devotion expressed in their Lord's looks and gestures, he embraced his Omar long and tenderly.

The joyful reunion was scarce accomplished, and father and son were but preparing to descend the mound for the feast that was to take place in the tents below, when a solitary figure was seen to be racing wildly across the plain towards the spot. As he approached, he was observed to be waving his arms frantically, and soon the astonished spectators could hear him shouting madly :

“ Stop ! stop ! stop ! ”

“ What's the matter with the man ? ” everybody naturally inquired, and the great chief or King turned to his newly-found son with the same natural question.

“ Father, alas ! I was indiscreet enough in my wanderings not to follow the injunctions of your poor friend Elfi Pasha ; and this poor fellow, whom I now recognise, is a maniac,

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who has heard my story and taken it into his demented head to believe that he is I."

This ready explanation, so glibly uttered, was quickly overheard by those about the two, and as quickly passed down the lines of astonished men.

"A maniac! A maniac!"

The words were repeated, and when the distraught creature dashed panting and frenzied into the outer lines, the sturdy guards soon surrounded him, and bound him helpless, though furiously struggling.

It was in vain he protested loudly and foaming with rage, that he was the real Omar, and that the villain who had usurped his place was a base-born knave who had robbed him of his dagger while he slept, mounted his horse, and stolen a march on him.

He was a maniac, for so had the Prince described him. As a maniac, he must, according to the custom that prevailed, be tenderly entreated. Still, he must be put out of harm's way, so they tightened his bands, and while the throng was feasting and holding high revel, he was lying powerless in the dust and gnashing his teeth.

When the banquet was over, the new Prince was ceremoniously introduced by his father to the lords and great officers of his kingdom.

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They did homage to him, kissed his hand, admired the loftiness of his stature, the pride of his mien, and the courteous grace and elegance of his manner.

Towards evening the signal was given to strike the tents. For a brief space there was a scene of confused haste, but soon the procession was formed in due order of rank and dignity, the Prince and his father being borne in a gilded palanquin, lined with blue silk and carpeted with the richest velvet, which was slung between two ambling mules.

As they travelled eastwards, the happy old father had much to talk about to his son. He told him that his name was Sa-ood, that he was the Sultan of the Wahabees, and that he had lived long before his prayer was granted and a son was born to inherit his throne. By a sad mischance, however, no sooner were his hopes of an heir fulfilled, than his astrologers announced that Heaven had decreed to postpone his happiness till his boy was twenty-one years of age. Bowed down with sorrow, he had inquired diligently if there was no means of revoking the stern doom, but his wise men had declared that unless he banished his son out of his presence for the specified time, disaster, destruction, and ruin would overtake his house and

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kingdom. In the sadness of his heart he had then bethought himself of his childhood's friend, Elfi Pasha. No man better than Elfi, ever wise in understanding, prudent in counsel, just, upright, and honourable in his life and dealings, could have been selected to assume a father's place in the up-bringing and training of a son. That his choice of a guardian had been well-made was confirmed by the evidences of his senses, and, clasping his boy again and again to his breast, he blessed him with many tears and smiles, and bade him recount the story of his exile and the terrible end of Elfi.

The task of furnishing a record of his life was not so hard as might be imagined, for the real Omar had been most communicative about the details of his past life, and had never been tired of praising and honouring the memory of Elfi. As regards the calamity of Elfi's death, all Egypt had been thrilled and shocked by the news of the revolt in Cairo, and the assassination of its great governor.

After many days of travel through the desert, eastwards and then southwards, the procession reached a land of trees and wells, cultivated fields, villages and towns. The route was now one long triumphal

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progress ; people left their work, and rushed out into the roads, shouting and crying :

“ Long live Sultan Sa-ood ! Long live Prince Omar ! ”

But the greatest triumph was to come in the Sultan's capital. Here the streets were all gaily garlanded and festooned with flowers and greenery, the windows and balconies were hung with gaudy stuffs and richly-woven carpets and fabrics. Thousands of throats were yelling themselves hoarse, and high above every other name the cries of “ Omar ! Omar ! Omar ! ” resounded with ever-increasing enthusiasm. And as the long line passed slowly on its way to the palace, the sight of a youth bound fast to his horse which was led on either side by a soldier, provoked feelings of surprise and pity.

“ Who is he ? What has he done ? Why is he a prisoner ? How sad to see him in misery on such an auspicious day ! ”

And the answer to the eager questions was always the same. “ He is a maniac ! a dangerous fellow ! an impostor ! He pretends to be Omar, and nothing we can say or do will move him to deny the claim he persistently asserts. Who knows what we have been spared through Providence delaying his arrival at El Serujah ? ”

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Such and other remarks of the kind were to wound the ears and stab the heart of poor Omar on a day when he ought to have been among the gladdest and the proudest. No wonder that grief and pain had sadly distorted his handsome face, and that, all unkempt and dishevelled as he was, there was little that could be described as princely or high-born about his appearance.

Arrived at the palace, he was safely locked up in a dismal cell, while the Sultan and his son were sitting in the throne-room and receiving the congratulations of all the great men of the city.

There was feasting and revelling in the capital that night; the streets were illuminated, and the crowds, in their merriest moods, came and went in front of the palace, shouting: "Omar! Long live Omar!"

Away in the women's apartments, Omar's mother was waiting anxiously to receive him. News had come to her of all that had happened. and, peeping through her lattice, she had caught glimpses of her husband and child, and also of that pathetic figure in the rear of the procession. To her pained inquiries also, the same answer had been given—"He is a maniac, a dangerous fellow, an impostor!" and, though she could not but rejoice that the

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mad youth had done her son no harm, her tender soul was filled with pity for his affliction, and the picture of his misery tinged the joy she should have felt with an oppressive sense of melancholy. As she waited in her State-room for the glad moment which was to unite her to her boy, her motherly heart revived all the thoughts and anxieties which had marked the long, cruel years of her separation from her only child. Day and night she had not ceased to think of him, and to wonder how he was prospering. Love lent wings to her fancy, and over and over again, waking or dreaming, she had spanned the intervals of space and was with the dear object of her thoughts. She had seen him grow up, slowly change from infancy into boyhood, and from boyhood into youth ; she had heard his baby cries, ministered oft in spirit to his needs and necessities, solaced him in his griefs and encouraged him in his hopes. Her fanciful impressions had shaped themselves into definite and distinct forms and shapes. Poor, weary, waiting mother ! Would the reality approach ever so remotely to the lineaments and characteristics with which imagination had endowed her son ?

The door suddenly opened and he stood before her.

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Tall, handsome, imposing, he undoubtedly was, but the joy which radiated from every look and feature of her face gradually died away, and she drew herself up in a stern, frigid attitude.

“Mother !” the Prince exclaimed, darting forward to embrace her ; but she repelled him with an imperious wave of her hand.

“This is no child of mine, Sa-ood !” she said, ignoring the youth at her feet.

“No child of yours ? This is Omar !” the Sultan replied.

“Omar, let him be ; there are a thousand Omars in your capital alone, but not one of them is my son, any more than he who stands before me.”

“Woman !” the Sultan exclaimed, with ill-concealed impatience, “will you deny your offspring against the evidences of his identity ?”

“He is not my child !” was the answer.

“But he is my son and heir !”

“He deceives you !”

“Mother ! mother !” the youth cried piteously.

“No, I do not acknowledge you and never shall !” the Sultana answered fiercely. “You may tempt the doting heart of a fond and foolish man, but you cannot beguile the affections of a woman who did not bear you,

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whose love never nurtured you, and whose whole being shrinks from you."

The Sultan furiously expostulated, raged stormed, and threatened, but she, who was usually an obedient, submissive wife, refused to listen to his words, or to be quailed by his anger.

"I am surely accursed by Heaven!" Sa-ood finally exclaimed, "for no sooner have I found my son, than Fate deprives my wife of her senses."

He stooped down, bade the Prince rise, and was turning to leave the apartment, when the door was violently burst open, and the frenzied captive, his clothes rent by his desperate struggles with his guards, his face and arms all scarred, wounded, and bleeding, rushed in, and fell at the Sultana's feet.

"Mother, you know me! Mother, save me! save me!"

With a piercing cry, and to the utter bewilderment and consternation of the Sultan his wife staggered forward, threw herself on the prostrate form, and with tears and sobs hugged him to her bosom.

"Omar! Omar, son!" she cried.

"Great Allah! what madness is this?" the Sultan thundered, and the guards having now entered, he denounced them in tones of furious anger for letting the maniac escape,

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and, dashing forward, he tore mother and son apart, and delivered the unhappy youth to his captors.

“Take him away, load him with the heaviest chains, and imprison him in the deepest dungeon !”

What a mournful end to a gladsome day ! The news of what had happened soon spread about in the palace, casting a depressing gloom of terror and foreboding on all minds and banishing sleep and rest from every eyelid.

Of the two beings who shared the responsibility for creating this distressful state of things, the new Prince, tossing feverishly on his billowy couch in a luxurious chamber, must surely have suffered more than the hapless man who, aching in every bruised limb, was groaning under the weight of his heavy fetters in a hard-paved, dank, and loathsome cell.

But, alas ! for the former, the ever-flattering fairy voices whispered on that the die was cast, that the dread workings of Fate must be accomplished, and that if the other was called to endure pain and humiliation, the blame was on those who had wilfully or thoughtlessly thwarted the will of destiny, and had interchanged or confused two innocent babes.

Day came, revealing once more to the tailor

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Prince's dazzled senses the full splendour of his proud state and lofty condition.

It was, therefore, with something even more noble, dignified, and commanding than the air which had distinguished him on his triumphal entry into the capital, that he appeared before the Sultan in answer to the royal summons.

Sa-ood was not alone. Sitting apart from him and wearing, if not a joyful, yet a more resigned and pacified look than on the night before, was the Sultana.

Sa-ood watched with ill-concealed pleasure the majestic progress of the Prince towards them, the imperious stamp of his features, and the respectful, yet haughtily unconstrained manner of his approach and greetings.

"Peace be with you, my son!" he exclaimed fondly embracing him. "You have slept well, I hope?"

"Yes, dear father, never better. May all blessings attend you and my dear mother!"

"Sit down, myson," the old man continued, leading him to his side on the divan.

"Ever obedient to your gracious wish, father, I wait your further will," was the courteous reply.

They talked for a while about this and that, the Sultana meanwhile observing a

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discreet silence, though the Prince tried gallantly to engage her in the conversation.

A quarter of an hour or so had slipped by, when Sa-ood tactfully steered the intercourse on to the subject of the pretender's claims.

"He is a maniac, I suppose?" he inquired, in the most casual tone.

"I grieve to say he must be."

"A tailor by trade?"

"Yes, and by name Labakan."

"Did you know him before meeting him in the desert?"

"I saw him in his famous master's shop when I went with Elfi Pasha to Alexandria, not many months ago. We were both struck by his appearance at the time, and we heard, on inquiring from his master, that he was a youth of fanciful imagination and aristocratic pretensions."

"Was he skilful at his work?"

"That depended much on his mood, it would appear."

Sa-ood stroked his long white beard thoughtfully, and glanced furtively at the Sultana, whose face remained calm and impassive.

"My son!" the old man observed at length, "this misguided man who seeks to usurp your name and station has been foolish enough to supplicate the mother, who denies your birth,

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to submit him to a strange test. He says that he will challenge you to a contest with the needle, and will abide by the result. If his work is better than yours, you are the Prince ; if your work is better than his, you are the tailor. Will you accept the terms which alone will satisfy your deluded mother's scruples about acknowledging your claims ?”

“Gracious father, but a short time ago I declared my humble and filial devotion to your will ; do you really consent to such a trial ?”

“I needs must in peaceful vindication of your superior claims.”

“Then I consent. What is the test to be ?”

“The embroidery of a State robe in three days.”

“Must I really stoop to such base skill ?”

“You must.”

“If his work is better than yours, you are the Prince ; if your work is better than his, you are the tailor ; and three days in which the matter is to be decided.”

“I—a tailor—for three days ?”

“Do you hear that, Sultana ?” Sa-ood asked, with a light heart.

“I hear it, my lord, and will faithfully abide by the decision of skill.”

The Prince sighed deeply and bowed him-

The False Prince

self ceremoniously out of the royal presence of his father and mother.

Once back in his apartments he had not long to wait for the proof that he was not mistaken about the challenge. A royal robe, plain and unadorned, was left in his chambers, with skeins of variegated silks and a bookful of the choicest needles.

How vexatious and repulsive that he should have to return to the mean toil he trusted to have abandoned for ever ! For hours and hours he sat moodily before the hideous thing, his whole soul in utter rebellion against the task he was called upon to perform. The doors were fast locked, and the windows too high above the ground to make escape possible, even if such a course could have been wise.

No ; sanely and deliberately considered, there was no mistaking the reality of the sordid trial imposed upon him : if Prince he was to be, and not for ever a tailor's drudge, he must work.

And so, on the third day, remembering how urgent it was that he should bestir himself, he cast away all doubt and hesitation, gloom and despondency, and set to work as he had never worked before.

The sun was dipping towards the west,

The False Prince

gilding the domes and crescents of the great capital with its departing glory, when the doors of his princely apartment were flung open, and he was meekly bidden to appear before the Sultan.

He hastily snatched up the royal vestment, alarmed that he had so heedlessly neglected to finish the embroidery of it, and, with a remorse-stricken face wholly unlike his proud mien, he appeared in the great throne-room of the Sultan. Nobles and chieftains thronged the vast space from end to end ; all that was greatest and best in his father's realm was gathered to witness the upshot of this supreme test of worth and dignity.

"Well, dear son !" the Sultan said, in his gentlest, most fatherly tones, "how has time fared with you ?"

"Badly, my Lord !" was the reply.

"Right glad I am to hear that answer !" Sa-ood exclaimed with sincere joy ; "but"—and his eyes lighted on the robe—"have you done anything ?"

"This, Sire, only this !" and the Prince, nervously held out his work.

It was little enough, indeed, but what there was of the work was faultless in colour and stitch.

The Sultan sighed deeply, and his wife,

The False Prince

ensconced in a recess hard by, breathed a loud gasp of relief.

Then the door of the hall was opened, and the other was ushered in.

"Well, madman, how has it fared with you?"

"Great and honoured father and King, what you have asked me to do is impossible! The scion of your house and the ward of Elfi Pasha was never taught to handle a needle or draw a thread. Ask me to mount your most fiery steed and to throw a javelin, challenge me to an encounter with your doughtiest champion, or defy me to accomplish the most splendid deed of bravery you can devise, but to sort out silks, and to sew with a needle as if I had been born a woman or bred a tailor, is beyond my powers. Take this garment; it is as you sent it. I would sooner forfeit my claims to sonship with you and meet death, than win a crown at such a contemptible price!"

A great murmur of satisfaction discreetly applauded this reckless speech.

The Sultan was obviously impatient at hearing it, but a terrible commotion at the doorway attracted all eyes in that direction.

"Make way, make way!" some dozen or so of hoarse, panting voices were crying.

The False Prince

“ We’ve come for Labakan. Where is the traitor ? Where is that thief ? that impostor ? that liar ? ”

The false Prince turned round, trembling and aghast, to see the chamber invaded by his master and his master’s troop of workmen and apprentices.

If the ground could have opened beneath his feet, he could have sunk into it, but trembling and ashamed, he stood there in the face of all that glorious throng of lords, ministers, and attendants. The frantic tailors paid no heed to the great company that was about them ; they passed the wretched Omar, defiantly scorning their violence ; their course, was straight for Labakan, and, reaching him, they nearly tore him limb from limb in their mad rage that he, one of them, a being so honoured as to belong to their craft in the workshop of the most famous master of the trade in Alexandria, should have dared to allow his presumption and pride to disgrace his nature, and to discredit their calling by such acts of treachery, baseness, and lying.

* * * * *

“ Thank God ! ” Labakan cried, aching all over through lying on a hard floor, and startled by the noisy entrance of his master and fellow-workers on the scene in which he

The False Prince

ad overslept himself. "Thank God ! thank God ! it is all a dream !"

The robe of Prince Selim was truly upon him, and well it fitted him, he was proud to acknowledge, but before he had been surprised by sleep, he had worked such wonders on it, that the tailor and his crew stood enraptured in awe and wonder.

Labakan was a changed man from that day forward. Proud he always was, but if the fairies ever whispered to him now, it was to remind him in the words of his strange dream that if he was to be a Prince and not a tailor's drudge, he must work, and work, and work.

Labakan never came to a throne, but he lived to be the envy of many Kings for the wealth and fame that mere work brought him.



I

THE FAIRY GIFT

IN the days of Haroun Al-Rashid, the famous Caliph of Bagdad, there lived in Balsora a man named Benazar. He was a well-to-do gentleman, and had no need to bother himself with work of any kind. He was wise, too, in his own fashion, for when Saïd, his only child and son, was born, and his neighbours counselled him to take up some occupation that would enrich him, he just replied that he could not see why he, at his age, should depart from the habits of his lifetime in order, if luck was with him, to leave Saïd better off, and, if misfortune befell him, to ruin the boy's prospects of a competency.

"Where two can dine a third need not starve," he said, quoting a favourite proverb of his. "If my son turns out a good fellow, he will have enough for his wants, and if he wants more, he can set about getting it."

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Benazar was as good as his words, for when Saïd grew up, he did not put him to any business or trade, but trained him up himself in all the wisdom and learning of the great poets and writers of his country, and because he deemed that besides philosophy and culture of mind nothing could grace a young man more than skill and courage, he caused the boy to be instructed in the arts of fencing, riding, swimming, throwing the lance, and shooting with the bow.

Saïd proved the aptest of pupils, both in mind and in body, and Benazar was very proud of his achievements and of his reputation for prowess.

The youth was eighteen years old when his father, taking all matters into consideration, decided to send him to Mecca to perform his religious duties, and thus to signify, according to the custom of all good Moslems, that the lad had now reached the noble estate of manhood.

Preparations were duly made for the great pilgrimage, and the day before the journey was to begin, Benazar called Saïd to him, commended him for his conduct, imparted much sound advice to him, and provided him with the money he would require on his travels.

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The boy dutifully listened to his father, thanked him for all he had done, promised ever to reverence and obey him, and was about to retire, when Benazar stopped him.

“I have one thing more, my son, to tell you, and one thing more to give you ; but I am much concerned about the matter, and about the manner of unbosoming myself to you respecting it. You know me well enough by now, I hope, to acknowledge that I am above the prejudices and rather petty vices, if I may so call them, of ordinary men. No one delights more freely than I in good stories about fairies, witches, sorcerers, bad and good spirits. It runs in the blood of our race to be charmed in our idle moments with astounding tales of magic beings and the mysterious doings of supernatural forces, but in my heart of hearts I am of neither a credulous nor superstitious nature. Where ignorance is bliss it would certainly be folly to be wise, but the ignorance that blindly accepts the chance workings of coincidence or the apparent manifestations of unseen powers about us as the expression of the will and purpose of the divine or malign influences that rule our destinies, is not an ignorance that I can share. Your poor mother, on the other hand, in striking contrast to me, was

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a devout believer in the weird and uncanny. She has been dead, good soul, these twelve long years. She was a faithful wife, and loved me well, but I had no patience with her simple-mindedness, and alas! often rudely shocked and pained her feelings by my profane incredulity. When she lay dying, she called me to her side, deplored the harsh way in which I had always ridiculed her beliefs, and confided to me that she herself was of fairy lineage, and that at your birth a fairy visitor had appeared to her and left as a present for you this toy golden whistle on its trumpery gold chain."

As he spoke, Benazar produced the frail trinket from a little box by his side, and handed it to his astonished son. While Saïd was examining it curiously, his father went on:

"Your mother's instructions were that I was to give you the thing when you were twenty. The good woman said twenty, I suppose, because it is at this age that the youth of our people are generally considered to have arrived at years of discretion. The kind fairy who bestowed this birthday gift on you can hardly have specified any particular time, unless she was singularly unable to forecast your future, an injustice that even I am not inclined to do her. You are going

The Fairy Gift

away to-morrow, two years, as it happens, through your own precocity, before the date on which, under ordinary circumstances, you would have gone forth on your first travels. Had I been a younger man, respect for your mother's wishes might have restrained me from telling you what you have now heard, and from giving you that trifling charm or amulet. But I am getting on in years, and am at a period of life when the human mind is most prone to consider the changes and chances of this mortal life. Having therefore duly considered the matter, I desire to relieve my conscience of the charge that was laid upon me on a most solemn occasion. I shall devoutly pray to see you again, but if that is not to be, I can now, at any rate, die with the happy sense that all has been done, so far as in me lies, to discharge my fatherly duty to you. And now go in peace; may your journey be prosperous and good fortune ever smile on you, but whatever betide, may Heaven always be with you, and help you to think kindly of one who loves and admires you!"

Saïd was deeply touched, and retired to his own apartment with strangely conflicting feelings, the pangs of parting with so good and wise a father as Benazar wrestling with

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the natural longings of a high-spirited, manly youth to see the world and court adventures.

With the morning, however, and all the bustle and excitement of a great caravan assembled on the outskirts of the town for the eventful pilgrimage to Mecca, Saïd's spirits recovered. Once more and affectionately he threw his arms round Benazar's neck and pressed his fond old father to his breast. Then the drums beat loudly, the sacred banners waved, and the procession moved away in a scene of dizzy and dazzling rapture.

The novelty of travel and the many interesting things that claimed his attention on the way were sufficient at first to occupy Saïd's mind, but as the company neared the desert and the prospect became ever more dreary and monotonous the young man fell to pondering over his father's farewell words to him. Thus meditating, it was not long before he drew the little golden whistle on its slender gold chain from the folds of his girdle, and, examining it curiously, at last put it to his lips to see what tones it would produce. To his amazement, blow as he would, he could not draw any sound from it, and he returned it with annoyance to its hiding-place.

He would fain have thought no more of it, but, having nothing better to distract him, his

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mind kept ceaselessly reverting to the story of his mother's mysterious relations with the unseen world of spirits. Like most boys at Balsora, he, too, had heard many fairy-tales and been fascinated by them, but they had always born the stamp of unreality about them. No living being who dwelt at Balsora ever claimed to have a first-hand acquaintance with "djins" and spirits; the narratives about all such weird folk were always located in out-of-the-way, distant lands and described as having happened in long bygone times. If they were ever true, it was natural enough that he should have grown up to believe that the days of miracles and wonders were past and over. How disturbing, therefore, to reflect that his own mother avowed herself to be of supernatural descent, and that a real fairy had deigned to visit her at his birth! Such musings could not fail to affect him outwardly, and thus, while the other pilgrims talked and laughed, sang and jested, he rode along dreamy and silent.

But Saïd was a very handsome fellow. He had beautiful dark eyes that sparkled with light and courage, his mouth was delicately moulded, his chin was firm, and his limbs and body lithe and shapely. He was splendidly mounted, well-dressed, and

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in spite of his youth, bore himself with a dignity that could not fail to attract the notice of his travelling companions. One of them, at any rate, seemed to take a special interest in him, for Saïd soon perceived that he was always by his side. He was an old man, and as Saïd had been brought up to reverence age he respectfully ventured one day to enter into conversation with his elderly neighbour on the journey. The old man, who had been silently observing him for some time, was so pleased with his courteous manners and mode of speech that the two were soon on the friendliest of terms, and their talk, wandering hither and thither, finally drifted from the world of reality to the realms of fancy.

Saïd was quick to avail himself of this change of topic, which fitted in so well with his preoccupation of mind, and boldly asked his venerable acquaintance for his opinion about ghosts and fairies, magic, sorcery, and witchcraft.

The old man had evidently been led to a subject that had caused him much perplexity and much serious thought, for he spoke very freely and feelingly about these strange matters.

“I am even more of a child than you,” he said, “for with my greater opportunities I am no wiser about the mysterious forces of

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Nature. Frail children of circumstance and not of deliberate choice as we are, how strange it is that we should forget that fact, and vainly seek to probe into the mysteries beyond, only to be appalled by our own infatuated theories ! You live, I live, and you and I are just what we are, if we are anything at all. How we came here, why we came here, we shall never know ; but because we want to know what would serve us no useful purpose if known, we see visions and dream dreams. Fairies, ghosts, ‘ djins,’ demons, good spirits and bad, they are and they are not, even as we are and are not, but, my son, let this be your constant care, live faithfully up to the faith that is in you, and so alone will you gain that peace of mind which will lead you at last to an eternity of bliss.”

That night, in his tent and all by himself, Saïd drew out his little gold whistle and examined it with unusual interest. The words he had heard were burnt into his mind : “ My son, live faithfully up to the faith that is in you.” It was enough. An eternity of bliss was, he youthfully hoped, still far away, but there was peace for his slumbers that night, and hope for the waking hours of the morrow in that significant counsel.

The morrow, as it proved, veered pleasantly

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enough towards the afternoon, when the horizon was strangely disturbed. Some said, there were sandhills ahead, others said dust-clouds, but a few, more expert, whispered Bedouin marauders. They were right, for it soon became evident that the dark mass was moving forward rapidly, and there was a glint of spears and a sheen of armour. The caravan formed into a square, the younger, with their arms ready, occupying the outside ranks, while the rest of the party ranged themselves behind, the tents and baggage being in the middle.

The Bedouins swept on like a hurricane, wildly brandishing their swords and lances. Seeing that they were to be resisted, they made no attempt to parley, but swooped round the pilgrims, and fiercely attacked them on all quarters. Bravely did the little band fight for their lives, but they were no match either in numbers or defence for their enemies. Among the last to make a desperate stand was Saïd. Now, if ever, he thought, as he realised how forlorn his chances of escape were, was the time to test the value of his whistle. He fumbled in his girdle with his left hand while fighting with his right, found the charm, put it to his lips, and blew. But no sound came from it, and in a frenzy

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of rage and disappointment he flung himself recklessly at the Arab who seemed to be the leader of the robbers, and hewed him down with a mighty stroke of his sabre.

When the Bedouins saw their chief fall, they raised loud cries of fury, and closed in overwhelming force round Saïd.

“Shoot him down ! shoot him down !” they yelled, finding it impossible to approach him, so murderously effective were his blows.

“No, take him alive ! He must die like a dog !” came a roar from behind ; and, loosing a rope from his saddle, the speaker dexterously threw it, and brought Saïd struggling to the ground. In a moment twenty men were upon him, and, disarming him, they bound him about with cords, and fastened him helplessly on a horse.

What a shameful plight for so gallant a fighter !

With tears of bitter grief in his eyes, Saïd cursed the cruel fate that had spared him to see the Arabs mourn over their dead chief and bury him. This first duty accomplished, they then sorted out the spoil, divided it up among themselves, collected the few survivors of the pilgrim band, and set out for their camp.

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II

THE BEDOUIN CAMP

It was at dawn of the next day that, looking gloomily ahead of him, Saïd saw a long, low line of black tents pitched under a straggling group of palm-trees. The robber horde was no sooner within hail than a crowd of women and children came forth to meet them with shouts of joy. But there was no glad response to their welcome, and the terrible news quickly flew from mouth to mouth, "Almansor is dead!"

"Almansor dead!" . . . "Incredible!" . . . "Impossible!" . . . "Almansor, the flower of the desert . . . the bravest of the brave . . . the Star of Hope . . . dead! . . . and killed by that stripling!"

These were some of the words that fell on Saïd's ears. But when the first crushing tidings of their great loss had ceased to stun, and feeling succeeded panic, angry passions were stirred, and raging tongues loosened. It was now that Saïd's guards had difficult work to protect him, for women and children, the older men of the tribe—nay, even the dogs of the camp—pressed round to drag him

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off his horse and tear him into shreds and atoms.

Saved from this violence and brutality, Saïd was at last ushered into a great tent that stood somewhat apart from the others. On a low, richly furnished couch at the farther end sat a venerable old man, with a long flowing beard of snowy whiteness. It was easy to see by his dress and his grave, proud look that he was the Sheikh or princely chief of the band.

“The howls of the women and the commotion in the camp have told me, what your faces and that man you have brought as a prisoner before me confirm, Alamansor has fallen!” the majestic chief said, directing piercing glances at Saïd and his guards.

“The news, alas ! is true, great Selim, ruler of the desert, and honoured Lord and Master. Almansor has fallen, and we have preserved his slayer alive in order that you might judge him, and decree, as you only have the right of decreeing, how this murderer of your noble son, our valiant leader, should die. Shall we set him up as a target for our arrows ? Shall we drive him through a passage of spears ? Shall we cause him to be torn asunder by horses, or bind him and throw him to our dogs ? . . .”

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Selim held up his hand, and there was silence ; then, fixing his keen eyes on the prisoner who stood proudly and erect before him, neither quailing nor flinching at the dreadful words he had heard, the old man asked him who he was.

Saïd answered the question briefly and frankly.

“ Did you kill my son treacherously ? Did you secretly shoot him when his back was turned, or in cowardly fashion attack him when he was unable to defend himself ? ”

“ No, my Lord. I killed him in open combat, when he and his men wickedly and suddenly attacked a smaller band than his own, travelling peacefully and with pious intent to the shrine of our Prophet.”

“ Does the young man speak the truth ? ” Selim asked, addressing the guards.

“ He does, gracious Lord,” was the answer.

“ Then he did neither more nor less than any brave man among us would have done. He fought and killed an enemy who threatened his life and his liberty unprovoked. It is my will that he be unbound.”

Saïd's captors regarded one another in blank amazement, doubting whether they could have heard the order given them aright.

“ Pardon, great chief ! ” the fiercest of them

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said, prostrating himself. "Pardon that we should hesitate, but is the slayer of your son, our noble Almansor, not to die?"

"He is not to die!" was the deliberate reply. "Nay, more, I will keep the youth in my own tent, and I claim him as my just share of the booty."

Aghast at this decision, the men somewhat roughly freed their prisoner, and retired with ill-concealed displeasure to spread the astounding decree of their master to the multitude that was impatiently waiting outside to quench their thirst for vengeance with the blood of Almansor's murderer.

The shrieks and yells of baffled rage that now broke forth clearly told how unpopular was the old chief's mercy.

Saïd looked at Selim. For a brief moment or two an angry flash gleamed from his eyes, and the workings of his face were terrible to behold. Happily for his people, his great strong heart sympathised with the feelings which expressed themselves in such suspicious tones of disapproval of himself; his wrath relented, and a sorrowful smile lit up his features.

"Almansor was very dear to them--and to me!"

"Great and gracious chief!" Saïd cried,

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bowing to the ground, "how can I thank you for your clemency, and how can I express the grief your goodness makes me feel for the untoward act of mine that has robbed you of a son and your people of a beloved leader?"

"If you had not slain him, he would have slain you. We who rashly traffic with men's lives and goods in the lonely places of the desert must take more than the usual risks if we allow indiscretion to outrun valour. You were travelling to Mecca, you said?"

"Yes, my Lord!"

"And now tell me where you came from and more about yourself!"

Saïd related all as he was bidden, and such was the favourable impression he made on Selim by his fine, manly presence, as well as by the plain, outspoken account he gave of himself, that, although he was to be a mere slave, he was henceforward always treated by the old man as if he had been his son.

The resentment which had been so unmistakably manifested in the tribe on the day of Saïd's pardon dared not show itself openly again, but it was none the less active in spite of the perfectly marvellous sway Selim held over the hearts and minds of his people. Saïd wondered more and more to see what a power sheer force of character and

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a stern sense of justice could wield over the unruly passions of lawless men. He went in and out of his master's tent without the least fear for his personal safety, but, as time wore on, and nothing he could do would atone for the crime he had so unwittingly committed, he became more and more unhappy, and for the good chief's sake and his own wished that he, instead of the adored Almansor had succumbed in that dreadful fight.

He was gloomily thinking these thoughts while waiting on the chief one day, when Selim upbraided him for his melancholy.

"You are right, Saïd—you are right," Selim said, after patiently listening to him. "It grieves me sorely that a people who love me really more than they fear me, because they know how I have nurtured them in love these fifty years or more, should cherish the memory of the son who was to succeed me with such hatred for you. I would have weaned them into loyalty and kindness by adopting you as the stay of my old age, but they cannot forget Almansor, and you must go. My power will no longer shield and protect you. I have become weak in seeking to make you strong. The bolder spirits of my company have gone, as you know, on a raid ; when they return, I will announce that

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your rich father at Balsora has sent me a heavy ransom for you, and I will entrust you to the most faithful of my followers, who shall conduct you safely out of the desert."

"They will murder me, my Lord !"

"No ; they shall be bound by the fastest of oaths to me. No man has ever yet sworn me an oath who has dared to break it. You will be safe."

Some days later, when the raiders were back in the camp, Selim fulfilled his promise. He presented Saïd with arms, rich clothing, and a horse, assembled his fighting men, and declared his purpose to set his personal slave free. He then chose five of the band, explained the reasons of his choice to them, and made them swear a fearful vow that they would honour his faith in them, and conduct the youth safe in life and limb to the confines of the desert. This done, he took an affectionate leave of Saïd, and bade him God-speed on his journey home to his father.

The five men of his escort did not attempt to disguise the reluctance with which they were carrying out the unpleasant duty imposed upon them. They rode, dark and silent, in Saïd's company for eight hours through the dreary waste, but the evil thoughts that gnawed within them and clouded their faces

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found expression at length in sullen whisperings. Saïd pricked up his ears, and overheard now and again that they were discussing in the dialect peculiar to their tribe whether they ought, in all conscience, to observe an oath exacted from them by a noble-minded man who had nevertheless proved to be an unnatural father.

With rare presence of mind, Saïd controlled himself so well that, unsuspecting of his knowledge of their speech which Selim had taught him, and urged by their cruel passion for revenge, they presently began to speak more loudly to one another.

“We are nearing the edge of the wilderness, and the time for decision is short,” said one ; “what do you say, comrades ?”

“An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, and therefore a life for a life, has always been our rough-and-ready code of justice,” a second remarked.

“It is Arab law wherever the free Bedouin roams,” interposed a third.

“But a vow is a vow, even among the sons of the desert, let me remind you,” broke in a fourth.

“The vow was not justified ; if we had been men, we should not have taken it,” said the first roughly.

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“ But you took it all the same ; it is therefore binding !” the fifth man dryly insisted. He was the oldest of the troop, and his words seemed to make a deep impression, for there was a long silence, which he again was finally to break.

“ You misjudge me, comrades, if you imagine that I mourn the death of Almansor less, or do not deplore the foolish clemency of his father more than you do. As I said before, however, an oath once solemnly taken is an oath, and your conscience would never give you peace if you broke it. For myself, what we swore to Selim, our Sheikh, we shall keep. The slayer of his son shall be brought to the verge of the wilds, but there we may leave him bound, for the burning sun by day or the hungry tooth of the hyena by night to avenge our cause. What say you ?”

A joyful and ready approval greeted these words, and poor Saïd had good need to summon up all his wits and all his courage. A cold shudder ran through his veins ; he looked furtively at his arms and more hopefully at his horse. Would it save him ? he wondered. It was not of the freshest, but it was a fine animal, and he was the most daring of riders. In his desperate straits thought transferred itself into action with a sudden-

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ness that stupefied his escort for a minute or two. But the robbers were not the men to be easily balked of their purpose. They quickly separated in different directions, and, being better riders than Saïd, and highly skilled at all the tricks of dodging and rounding up their quarry, they speedily outflanked him, and, with a dexterous cast of the lasso, soon brought him panting and exhausted to the ground.

“I will not sue for mercy, but I do appeal for pity,” Saïd urged, while they tied his hand and foot. “As men who can admire courage, kill me, but do not leave me to die a cruel death on these burning sands.”

For all answer, the Arabs laughed scornfully, mounted their horses, and were gone.

There the wretched Saïd lay, groaning and helpless, while the sun scorched mercilessly down upon him. The only relief he could get—and it gradually became more and more temporary—was to roll himself over with almost superhuman efforts, so that he was now on his back, and now on his side. The horror of his condition was too awful to allow him even the solace of thought, which is often the last comfort of a doomed man. He was miserably undone: if the sun did not kill him, the wild beasts of the desert would not

The Golden Whistle

be long in scenting out his body, and he would be torn asunder piecemeal and devoured. What a fate for a promising youth on the threshold of life ! He turned over for the last time, prepared to shut his eyes for ever on a world that had rejected him, when he saw his little golden whistle lying before him. It must have dropped somehow from his girdle, where he kept it, and, though he had no reason so far to value its powers, it supplied him in the dire extremity of his need with Hope, the last and greatest support which can soothe the human mind amid the trials of life, and sustain him in the hour of death.

With parched and fevered lips, Saïd edged himself up slowly to the whistle, blew it, and fainted away.

III

THE MERCHANT OF BAGDAD

What happened in the interval he was never to know, but the cords that bound him were being unloosed, and, with the dread fear that the hyenas were gathering about him, he exerted all the strength that was left him to struggle for dear life against their attacks. His attempts were of the weakest, though



*"Saïd was tended and brought
back to life by a chance traveller."*

The Merchant of Bagdad

they made a great demand on the little energy that was left in him. Happily for him, no wild beast had seized him in its clutches, for his waking consciousness soon apprised him of human voices :

“He is alive,” they said ; “handle him gently. . . .”

Saïd opened his eyes at length, and saw a fat little man bending over him. Looking more closely at him and at the two black attendants who were cutting away his bonds, Saïd failed to identify them as of Selim’s tribe, and, supposing that he was in a delirium, would have shut out the sight of imaginary relief, when he felt a flask of some cordial being pressed to his lips, and kind voices cheering him to take courage.

True or not—and for a longer space than he could conceive it seemed wholly incredible to him—Saïd was really being tended and slowly brought to life again by a chance traveller across the desert.

He was a merchant of Bagdad, Kalum-Beg by name, a dealer in shawls and woman’s finery, on his homeward journey from Damascus. Saïd thanked him for his kind offices, and gladly accepted his offer to seat him on one of his heavily laden camels and to take him to Bagdad.

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Bagdad was in those days the most famous city in the east, and Kalum-Beg had much to tell Saïd about the glory of its buildings, the prosperity of its trade, and, most of all, about the renown of its great ruler, the celebrated Haroun Al-Rashid, which means Aaron the Just. Just he was, and wise above every Caliph and King who had reigned at Bagdad, and his people almost worshipped him, so beneficent was his sway, so righteous his dealings, and so constant his zeal for the welfare of his subjects.

“He does not even require sleep as we ordinary creatures do ; a few winks snatched in the earliest hours of the day are sufficient to refresh him,” Kalum-Beg said, adding : “I suppose I know more about the intimate life of the Caliph than anyone outside the palace, for my cousin Munsoor is his first chamberlain, and, although he is as silent as the grave about his master’s doings, I do now and again pick up little scraps of information to satisfy my curiosity, and I have heard enough to confirm the rumours that the Caliph wanders in and out of the streets by night as well as by day, now in one disguise and then in another, in order to see for himself how his laws are kept, and how he may add to the peace and security of his people. Hence you

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will notice that the inhabitants of Bagdad are scrupulous to respect the persons of those who cross their way in the streets and squares, since no man can ever be sure that the beggar he meets, the fool who stares at him, or the dirty Arab who pushes past him is not the Caliph."

Saïd listened attentively to Kalum-Beg's stories, and, although he could have wished that the road he was travelling would have led him to Balsora, he was not sorry altogether for the opportunity his rescuer afforded him to see the wonder-city of Bagdad.

The little party had been journeying for ten days through a rich and smiling country, when the domes and minarets of Bagdad loomed into sight. Nearing the gates, Saïd was overwhelmed by the busy scene that met his gaze; he had never looked before on a crowd so dense and so picturesque in variety; but while it interested him the spectacle also depressed him. What room was there in all that world of activity and bustle for a lonely man like himself, with not a friend to welcome him, he mused.

Kalum-Beg must have divined his thoughts from the sadness of his air, for, before Saïd could frame his feelings into words that would have expressed his utter sense of desolation,

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the merchant cheerfully bade him accept the hospitality of his house.

“In spite of what I have told you about Bagdad, it is, I fear me, a sorry place for a homeless and inexperienced wanderer. There is nothing cheap about it except the air, the forecourts of a mosque, or—the waters of the Tigris,” he jocularly remarked.

Saïd blessed the happy circumstance that provided him with food and shelter under a generous man’s roof, and, having ate well and slept well, he got up in the morning, arrayed himself with unusual care, and was prepared to enjoy himself in the famous city, when Kalum-Beg entered his room. He looked the brave and handsome youth roguishly up and down, stroked his beard with a cunning twinkle in his eye, and said :

“Very fine, very fine, young man ; but what’s it all going to end in ? Methinks you are either somewhat of a dreamer, or you have concealed a goodly store of wealth from me. How else do you think you are going to live up to that lordly style and dress of yours ?”

“Dear sir,” Saïd replied, perplexed at the change of tone and manner in the merchant, and abashed by his own thoughtlessness, “I have no money, but you will, I hope, extend the debt I already owe you to an advance

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that will allow me to proceed to Balsora, where I will answer for my father that you shall be amply repaid."

"Ha ! ha !" Kalum-Beg laughed scornfully. "Your father, youngster ! The sun of the desert has sodden your brains, it strikes me. Do you think I believed for a minute all the stuff and nonsense you told me about your father at Balsora and your adventures with the robbers ? I know every merchant of means in Balsora, but never a one who is called Benazar ; and as for that affair in the desert, our great Caliph has purged the roads of commerce of all plunderers and highwaymen ; otherwise how do I come to traffic with safety between here and Damascus, Aleppo, and even so far as Alexandria and Smyrna ? You are a sorry liar, young man !"

Pale with rage, Saïd would have thrust the slander down the miserable merchant's throat, but Kalum-Beg was wily enough to have posted himself out of range of a sudden attack, and Saïd was too noble to have recourse to violence.

"I have told you no lies, Kalum-Beg !" he exclaimed, when he could speak at all. "Swear me by all that you hold truest and most sacred !"

"Swear you, boy ! No oath could hold with a stripling like you."

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“ I can bring no witnesses to prove my stories, but did you not find me bound and dying ?”

“ True ! But who will tell me that, rich and stately though you are clad, you are not yourself a robber who found a strong man armed more powerful than you ?”

“ There is not a man in all your city of Bagdad who would dare to meet and fight me in single combat under fair conditions. Try me and prove me. But, Kalum-Beg, I am forgetting myself. My father taught me that gratitude is the highest of virtues and the most difficult to practise. You saved my life. I owe it to you to be grateful. Now, then, do what you will with me. Support me in my need, or, if you wish to be cruel, strip me of my fine clothing and send me forth to beg ; if I cannot touch the heart of the wise Caliph you praised to me, I can, perhaps, find the comfort of rest in the deep waters of the Tigris.”

“ Aha ! now you are coming to your senses,” the merchant sneered. “ With my cousin where he is, I could not promise you much consideration from the Caliph ; as for the Tigris, it would seem rather a pity, would it not, that a strapping youngster like yourself should be fished up one fine day all limp and

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lifeless ? Better leave that to the wastrels who foolishly stray into Bagdad and hope for miracles in a practical world. Eh ! what do you think ? Shall I suggest a more likely career for you ? My shop in the bazaar is pretty well known, but an aristocratic presence like yours might help the business to go better. What do you say to being my crier ? The job is not a hard one ; all you have to do is to show yourself, and to use your lusty young lungs well. Think the matter over between now and noon. I don't want to be unreasonable. I will engage you for a year and a day from to-morrow, and if you agree to accept the post, I will cancel all charges for your safe conduct hither, and pay you enough to enable you to return to Balsora and show your father a margin of profit. Good-bye for the present."

Left to himself, Saïd paced restlessly up and down the room, boiling with rage at the proposal made to him, and storming at the evil powers that had doomed him to be the victim of a cunning, mean-spirited wretch like Kalum-Beg. The man was the most artful villain that his young and inexperienced imagination could conceive. Never for an instant did Saïd have the least cause to suspect his motives in treating him with such

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kindness and consideration on their journey to Bagdad. What, however, was the good of raging and reviling ? To be happy he must be wise, Benazar had sagely counselled, and wisdom clearly lay in stomaching his pride and bending like a reed to the rude blasts of ill-fortune.

The next day, therefore, clad in a sober suit of cloth without delicate embroideries and other marks of his gentle condition, Saïd was taken down to the bazaar and instructed in his new duties of standing outside the merchant's shop, and proclaiming loudly to all and sundry who passed his way what store of beautiful shawls, lovely veils, intricate lace-work, and fine products of the looms of Smyrna, Aleppo, Trebizond, and Damascus were to be bought within. It was some weeks before he could glibly patter off the gibberish of the trade, but from the first hour that he stood in the market, the eyes of Bagdad had marked him out for his handsome presence and the nobility of his mien and gestures. Many a lady who had avoided the shop of the ugly, fat little Kalum-Beg was enticed to give the merchant a trial for the sake of his newly imported crier. It was a pleasure to be addressed by such a youth, to look into his dark eyes, and to touch his fingers as he

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handled the specimens of the wares that tempted them to purchase.

Kalum-Beg's shop became the talk of the harems and the envy of the town, and Kalum-Beg was not fool enough to undervalue the credit Saïd brought to him. His treatment of the young man grew daily more gentle and considerate ; he fed him well, housed him comfortably, and was very careful not to irritate or annoy him. Mindful of the compact of a year and a day which had many months to run, Saïd gratefully accepted such benefits as Fortune provided for him, but in his heart of hearts he sorely chafed at his lot, and thought sadly of his father, of Balsora, and freedom.

He had lost all faith in his little golden whistle, which had been somewhat strangely preserved amid the vicissitudes that had befallen him ; but it was his still, and though it blew no sounds, his poor mother had believed in its virtues, and he kept it for her sake in the folds of his girdle.

He was loquaciously engaged in discussing the merits of a particular fabric one day with a lady who had hitherto studiously avoided Kalum-Beg's shop, when the little whistle dropped out of its hiding-place. Saïd thrust it back, but the lady had seen it, and, to his

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tonishment, brushed past him uncere-
noniously, and was soon busily occupied in
rying up the best of his master's stock.
er bulky purchases completed and packed
p, she asked the merchant, as she was
ying him, for a porter to carry the goods
her house in her train.

"The parcels shall be delivered in half an
our, my lady," Kalum-Beg said.

"But I want them to go with me, and at
ice!"

"I am sorry, my lady; we have been un-
sually busy to-day, and all my men are out
st now carrying things all over the town."

"Well, if I cannot have my packages now,
suppose I must do without them altogether,"
ie lady remarked, taking back her money.

"You will surely not be so impatient,
adam?" pleaded the merchant.

"I don't call this a respectable shop at all,
a customer cannot have her wishes attended
after offering to spend a small fortune here.
's your duty to keep a larger staff," the lady
id indignantly, and turned to go. But she
iddenly changed her mind, and, facing
alum-Beg again, she asked loudly, pointing
t Saïd :

"What's that lazy young fellow doing out
ere? Why can't he carry the things for me?"

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“He is my crier, gracious lady.”

“Crier! What does an honest dealer want with a crier, I should like to know? Here, boy!” she called to Saïd, “pick up those parcels and follow me to my house with them. There’s your money, merchant, and I hope for your sake I may find the goods what you pretend they are,” she added, flinging some forty gold pieces at Kalum-Beg, and loftily sailing out of the shop.

Saïd, rejoicing in his heart to hear his crafty master so soundly snubbed, and, only too glad of an opportunity of leaving his hateful post for a while, even to serve as a menial porter, picked up the lady’s purchases, and threaded his way through the crowded streets at a discreet distance behind her.

IV

THE HANDSOME CRIER

She stopped in due course at one of the biggest houses in the most select quarter of Bagdad. A couple of black slaves deferentially opened the door for her, and, signing the youth to attend her, she led him through a sumptuous hall, up a flight of marble steps, and into a luxuriously furnished apartment.

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Here she was met by a little group of maidens, who rushed forward to conduct her to her ivaan, and then, at a whisper from her, relieved Saïd of his burdens and disappeared.

“Here’s a silver piece for your pains, young man,” she remarked ; and Saïd stepped forward and respectfully touched with his lips the richly jewelled fingers which held the coin. He had turned and was about to depart, when, to his great amazement, he heard a soft, silvery voice addressing him by name.

“Saïd, son of Benazar !” the voice repeated. There was no mistaking the call this time, and he looked round. The lady on the couch had thrown aside her veil and put off the ample meet that disguised her form when she was at shopping. What Saïd saw was a stately, gorgeously attired figure standing before him. He was not a young woman, but she was as beautiful as a golden day in early autumn. Quick as only thought once stimulated can travel, the youth remembered the little episode of his whistle, and, strangely convinced that he was face to face at last with the good fairy of his birth, he dropped reverently on his knees in a fervour of humble adoration.

“Saïd, my dear boy, it is you, then, as I suspected ! For days and days I have watched you outside that shop, but not till

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this morning could I be certain. Have you the golden whistle ?”

“ I have, dear fairy,” Saïd cried joyfully, and drew the little trinket from his girdle.

“ Fairy ! Fairy ! Well, let it be fairy,” the lady said, as she approached, took the whistle, and lovingly inspected it. “ I was the dearest friend of your dead mother ; I was even more, for she and I were twin sisters. We were the only children of Saïd Hassan, the greatest man in the country of Damascus. Misfortune befell our father, and he wandered to this land, first to Balsora, where your mother was married to Benazar, and then to Bagdad, where in due course I was married. Of all the worldly possessions that your grandfather prized, he esteemed none more than this little charm, the exact history of which he himself did not know ; but he always spoke of it as a gift to the family from a fairy ancestor. For generations the whistle had descended from father to son, and Saïd Hassan was the first of his line to have no male heir to whom to bequeath it. When the news came that your mother was expecting a child, my father bade me disguise myself and go to her house. If the child that was born was a son, I was, without revealing myself, to give him the name of Saïd and this whistle ; if the

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child was a daughter, I was to come back with the charm. You were born the very morning I reached Balsora. The circumstance was fortunate, since your mother seemed to have been anxiously expecting some fairy visitor ; and when my arrival was announced, I was taken at once into her apartment. There I took you into my arms, kissed you, and hung this token about your neck ; then, addressing your mother, I delivered the message given me by my father, that you were to be called Saïd, that you were to be carefully brought up in all righteous ways, and watchfully nurtured at home till you were of the full age of twenty ; then only were you to be allowed to go out into the world, and you were to bear this golden whistle on its frail golden chain always about you to guard and protect your courses through life. Benazar is a good man, who has reared you wisely and well, but he has broken one of the solemn conditions that your mother vowed he should observe. Great troubles have fallen upon you in consequence. You are reaping what another has sowed, and must still suffer. . . .”

“ Oh, but you can help me—you can help me now ; for you are the kind fairy,” the youth besought, with tears in his eyes.

“ No, Saïd ; I would not add to your suffer-

The Handsome Crier

ings by attempting to interfere with the happy chance that has made it possible for me to meet you. You are very wretched, I know, with Kalum-Beg, but if he had not saved your life in the desert, you would not have been here."

"He is a bad man!"

"Yes, very evil and cunning, but you have no escape from him."

"Surely the just Caliph would help me if he knew?"

"The just Caliph would not set aside the compact you have made with Kalum-Beg. He dare not; a bond is a bond! Besides, the great Caliph is, after all, only human; in spite of his desire to be in personal touch with his people, he cannot be here, there, and everywhere, and must needs rely to some extent on his ministers and officials. Now, his trustiest adviser is his chamberlain Munsoor, and Munsoor is Kalum-Beg's cousin, and Kalum-Beg has taken the precaution of poisoning his cousin's mind against you. You can do nothing, you see, but must patiently bide your time and the opportunities it will afford."

"Unhappy man that I am!" Saïd exclaimed, overwhelmed by the contemplation of his merciless lot.

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“ I grieve for you, my boy, doomed to be a common crier in the bazaar when Nature fitted you out with advantages that would have graced a prince.”

“ Yes, dear fairy, it is hard to bear. Is there no relief that would in some way mitigate the abject condition of my service ? I was trained to feats of skill in arms and horsemanship, and when I see the noble youths of Bagdad riding out in all their happy freedom to fight and wrestle, throw the lance and bend the bow, then it is that I suffer most.”

“ Here is your whistle ; take great care of it, and go now ! You must not attempt to see me again ; if I want you, you shall know. Good-bye !”

Saïd kissed the hand held out to him and departed.

When Saïd got back to the bazaar he was surprised to find a great crowd outside his master’s shop and a terrible commotion going on inside.

He did not know till afterwards what had happened, but it seems that when he had followed the lady as a porter, Kalum-Beg had taken his place at the shop-door, and was acting as his own crier. Presently two men came along the bazaar, and passed up and

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down several times as if they were eagerly searching for something or somebody. Kalum-Beg noticed their inquiring glances, and called out :

“ Here, gentlemen—here ! You are perhaps trying to find a beautiful veil like this, or a fine bit of lace of this kind,” he said, holding out samples of his wares to them.

“ Your things may be most excellent, old fellow,” one of the men remarked ; “ but our ladies have grown particular of late, and there is only one shop in the bazaar where they choose to buy. It is the shop with the handsome crier, though where it is, is the mystery that has been perplexing us this half-hour or more.”

“ Allah be praised that I spoke to you ! This is the shop ; walk in, walk in.”

“ And you are the beautiful crier, I suppose ?” the man said, laughing.

“ Let the ugly little fool be ; it’s no good wasting words on the scoundrel,” his companion observed.

Kalum-Beg was furious. He protested angrily that he would not be insulted, that his was the shop they had been seeking, and loudly called on his neighbours to attest the truth of his statement. His fellow-tradesmen, however, who had always disliked him for his sly, mean character, and had lately

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grown jealous of the custom Saïd had brought to his shop, would have nothing to do with his quarrels, and simply gathered round, blandly gaping and shrugging their shoulders in answer to his fervent appeals.

The two men, now firmly convinced that the merchant was an old rascal, abused him soundly as a liar, a cheat, and a knave, and, finding they could not silence him with their tongues, they drove him into his shop, and proceeded to thrash him, to the great delight of the laughing, hooting crowd, into whose midst Saïd suddenly thrust himself. Scattering the people to left and right, Saïd darted forward to his master's rescue, seized one of the assailants by the collar and the other by the arm, and flung them violently against the walls of the shop.

"Now then, you fine gentlemen," Kalum-Beg squeaked in his rage and excitement, "who is a liar, a cheat, a knave? There is my handsome crier; dare to deny it to his face!"

Confronted by so clear and formidable a proof that the merchant had told them the truth in the first instance, and that they had been guilty of an unpardonable assault which might entail disastrous consequences if it reached the Caliph's ears, the two men were

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glad to slink off as quietly as possible, and the bazaar soon resumed its wonted air of busy peace.

“Saïd, you prince of criers, how can I thank you—how can I praise you ? It was well for me that you arrived in the very nick of time ; truly in another moment I should have been undone !”

“We are quits in that case, dear master ; you in the desert and I in the bazaar have been useful to one another.”

“Perhaps, perhaps . . .” Kalum-Beg snivelled in the loathsome, calculating way which always stirred the gall in Saïd. Fool that he was, he brooded sadly ; what a pity he had not restrained the impetuous promptings of a compassionate nature, and left the merchant to the tender mercies of his aggressors ! But it was too late to sigh over his mistake of judgment, and as Kalum-Beg was really softened for the time being towards him, and anxious in some way or other to reward him for his opportune assistance, Saïd asked that once a month, on a Friday afternoon, when business was always slackest, he should be allowed a holiday, and be free to don his own apparel.

Kalum-Beg, ever suspicious, hesitated, but as nothing else he could suggest would please

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Saïd, he ungraciously acceded at last to the request, on strict conditions that Saïd should never be out later than ten o'clock at night, or forget his bond to serve him faithfully for the full period to which he had solemnly agreed.

Those free Friday afternoons were as welcome in Saïd's dreary and monotonous life as a refreshing rain in a parched land. He impatiently counted the days from one to another of them, and when the short hours of freedom came he retired to his room, hastily threw off the mean garb that was the badge of his slavery, and carefully attired himself in the magnificent apparel given him by Selim. He let himself out by a little door that opened into a secluded alley behind the merchant's house, and reached the main streets by devious ways, in order to hide the place whence he came. It was a wise precaution in some respects ; still, had he only known how totally changed he was in his fine raiment, how proudly he held up his head, how firm his step was, and how bold his look, he might have spared himself much unnecessary walking and delay in getting to the sports' ground. No one who saw him standing about and keenly watching the games and exercises of the brave and noble youth of Bagdad would have sus-

The Handsome Crier

pected for a moment that he was the handsome bazaar crier. By keeping to himself and not actively courting the society of the distinguished spectators at the sports, an air of mystery was, however, imparted to his periodical attendance. People began to ask in whispers who this distinguished stranger was, and the competitors in the races and tournaments, attracted by his appearance and the lithe and athletic build of his figure, wondered why he should not seek to enter the field with them, and display the skill and prowess that he obviously possessed.

Ali Bey, the son of the Grand Vizier, a champion athlete, and the chief organiser of the sports, was especially interested in him, and, being unable any longer to restrain his curiosity, he one day suddenly brought his horse round to where Saïd stood alone, and gallantly accosted him.

“It is not meet, honoured stranger, that you should any longer hold aloof from the company of men who would be proud to engage you in feats of arms. Here is my horse ; will you give me the pleasure of riding it in a bout of lance-throwing with my comrades.”

“Accept my best thanks, kind sir,” Saïd replied, with a courteous bow. “I am sadly

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out of practice at riding ; still, it would be churlish of me to refuse a gracious offer so graciously made."

Ali Bey was delighted, and, holding the stirrup for Saïd, the latter swung himself gracefully into the saddle, and proceeded to try the paces of the high-bred animal. Murmurs of applause greeted the dexterity with which the stranger handled the horse and made it obedient to his will ; no better riding had been seen in Bagdad for many a day. Leading the charge in the difficult game of lance-throwing, Saïd again proved himself an expert, and won the admiration of all the beholders.

He modestly dismounted, and gratefully returned the horse to its owner, with compliments about its excellences and the manner in which it had been trained.

" You have shown yourself so accomplished a sportsman that I am tempted, honoured stranger, to challenge you to a fencing match, if you are not too tired after your exertions," Ali Bey said respectfully.

" I am at your service, generous sir, though I fear you will not find me worthy of your skill."

The contest that followed did such credit to Saïd's knowledge of the practice and usages

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of the art of self-defence that, although he was defeated, the cheers of the spectators clearly demonstrated their opinion that he had suffered no disgrace in yielding the palm of victory to a swordsman of Ali Bey's redoubtable fame.

V

A NIGHT'S ADVENTURE

The daylight had now begun to fade, and, the sports being ended, Saïd found an opportunity of slipping quietly away and quickly losing himself in the scattered crowd. He was warily dodging in and out of the less frequented streets, up a narrow lane here and down a dark passage there, when he drew near to a party of four men who were so engrossed in conversation that they had not overheard his approach. He was just thinking how best to avoid them, when snatches of their talk fell on his attentive ears. The sounds of their gibberish made the blood run hot and cold in his veins ; they were men of Selim's robber band. His first impulse was to slip away, for surely they would not have ventured into Bagdad on any other errand than to search him out and wreak their unrelenting vengeance on him. It was dangerous to dog

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their footsteps, but, elated by his successes of the day, and braced to a pitch of daring as foolish as it was brave, Saïd hung on their tracks, stopping when they stopped, darting into a doorway when they turned round, and every now and again, with the experience he had acquired of the by-ways and alleys of the town, out-distancing them, and overhearing their talk as they passed him hidden under an archway, or lurking in the darkness of a gloomy porch.

It must have been nearly midnight, and Saïd was still in doubt of the real purpose of the ruffians, when they chanced upon two belated wayfarers at the entrance of the bazaar. Before he had time to realise what had happened, the scoundrels had pounced on the unsuspecting pair, and were proceeding to gag them. The sight of such treacherous violence was too much for Saïd, and, drawing his sword, he boldly rushed to the rescue of the unoffending citizens. He had hewn down two of the robbers with slashing blows to right and left of him before their companions could collect their senses; the third slung a noose for him, but the rope fell short of its mark, and Saïd had transfixed the man, while the fourth was struggling vainly in the clutches of two elderly gentlemen.



*"Four men of Selim's
robber band."*

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"Let him die, masters!" Saïd cried; and, swinging fiercely round on the robber, he pierced him to the heart, with the ringing shout current in Bagdad, "So let all the enemies of the great Caliph perish!"

"Young man, whoever you be, you have truly saved the Caliph's life," said a gentle voice.

Saïd fell on his knees.

"God be praised, O father of the faithful, if you really are the Caliph! I am a poor, wretched, humble man, but if you are the great Haroun Al-Rashid, give me your blessing, and I am happy!"

"You are blessed, my son, for the help you have given me," the Caliph said, and, taking Saïd by the arm, he added: "Rise, and let us not linger here; meanwhile, take this ring, and bring it to my palace to-morrow; you shall then receive the thanks that I owe you. Come, Vizier," he continued, addressing his companion, and moving on.

"Gracious Master, allow me also to offer the saviour of my life some token of my gratitude. Young man, here is my purse; what it contains may minister to your present needs; your future, under the grateful protection of my Lord, the Caliph, will require no sort of assistance from me." Then, bidding

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Saïd God-speed on his homeward way, the Vizier joined the Caliph, and the two were gone.

Saïd, utterly bewildered by the amazing turn his night's adventure had given to his fortunes, stood rooted to the spot for a while. Soon remembering, however, where he was, and that it was no place in which to loiter with four corpses strewn about him, he slipped the ring on to his finger, pocketed the heavy purse, and directed his steps to his lodgings. But as he walked along, thoughts of Kalum-Beg, and of the fearful scoldings, insults, and worse, that awaited him at the merchant's house checked his progress. No, come what might, after having once more tasted the joys of associating in friendly rivalry of sport with men of his own condition in life, and with minds as noble as Ali Bey's, he could never go back to slavery and to the humiliating duties of a vulgar shop-crier in the bazaar. The Vizier's purse contained more than enough money, judging by its weight and the feel of the coins, to enable him to reach Balsora, while the joy of being with his father was dearer to his heart than the hope of favour from even so great a ruler as Haroun Al-Rashid.

Turning aside, then, from the way that led

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to Kalum-Beg, Saïd went down to the square and the great caravanserais, where the travellers from near and far were wont to assemble before undertaking their journeys.

The first glimmerings of dawn were streaking the eastern horizon when Saïd wandered into the groups that were already being formed by men intent on the same errand as himself. He found traders to Damascus, Aleppo, Smyrna, Constantinople, and the chief towns of India ; but the sun was high in the heavens before he could hear of any party going southwards to Bushire, Koweit, and Balsora. Succeeding in his object at last, he was just concluding terms with the organiser of a small expedition to the head of the Persian Gulf, when noisy cries behind him caused him to turn round. To his horror, his eyes fell on Kalum-Beg, heading a band of town guards.

"There he is, there he is!" the furious merchant screeched in the tumult of his rage. "Seize him ! Bind him ! That's my crier ! He has pillaged my stores, robbed me of my money, and dressed himself like a gentleman at my expense ! Get hold of him quick !"

"He is a base liar !" Saïd exclaimed, standing his ground valiantly. But the guards were too many for him, and there was not a man in the crowd that had rapidly gathered

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round who had the courage to support him against the word of a villain, known in all Bagdad to be the cousin of the Caliph's First Chamberlain.

Saïd was rapidly surrounded, bound, and dragged to the nearest law-court. The magistrate, informed of the pressing nature of the suit and the powerful influence behind the merchant, took the case at once. Saïd was searched, and, as Kalum-Beg stoutly maintained that the purse of gold was his, the money was counted out—three hundred good pieces in all—and sentence duly pronounced on the accused in the following terms :

By decree of the Caliph, every theft exceeding a hundred gold coins from a recognised trader in the markets of Bagdad, was punishable by exile for life on a desert island at the mouth of the Tigris. The prisoner, being duly convicted on the testimony of his master, a highly esteemed shopkeeper in the Great Bazaar, must forfeit the money found on him, and complete the number of twenty delinquents like himself who were waiting to be conveyed to their place of banishment.

In vain Saïd, mindful of his ring, fervently appealed to be heard by the Caliph ; in vain, too, Kalum-Beg, richer in money, but poorer by the loss of his crier, pleaded for justice

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less stern. The magistrate was obdurate, and the unfortunate youth was ignominiously hurried off and thrust into a loathsome cell, in the company of a disreputable score of foul-mouthed and filthy thieves. Though he hoped that on board the galley the air would at least be purer, Saïd found his miseries ten-fold multiplied ; for he was consigned with the other malefactors to the deepest and darkest hold, and left to pine miserably on the scantiest allowance of food and water.

Saïd had never prayed for death more fervently than he did now. Even his sufferings as he lay bound in the burning sun of the desert were as nothing compared to the torments he endured in the stench and stuffiness of that horrible ship's room. To add to his ill-fortune, the sea, when they reached it, was very rough, and the wretched captives, some dead, some dying, and the rest in cruel torture, were thrown one against another, and dashed now to one side of the ship, and then to the other.

It must have been ten days after they had embarked that the water began to find its way into the hold, and all sound and signs of human beings overhead had ceased. Suspecting what had happened, the few, who had any strength left in them, battered madly and

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with united efforts at the hatches which imprisoned them. It seemed a forlorn hope, but the instinct of self-preservation endowed them with almost superhuman energies. The boards gave way, and Saïd, with half a dozen companions in misery, stood at last on the deck of a deserted sinking ship that was drifting in a heavy storm along a rock-strewn coast. The sight of their perilous condition completely distracted the minds of Saïd's fellow-prisoners, and, reckless of the certain death that awaited them, they plunged headlong into the waves in a vain attempt to swim to the shore. By clinging to the wreck, Saïd, to be sure, flattered himself with no empty hopes of deliverance; sooner or later the vessel would either founder and he must be drowned, or it would drive on to the coast and he would be dashed to death on the rocks. How strangely Fate had dealt with him ! he was led to ponder. But as his eye fell on the Caliph's ring a new turn was given to his thoughts, and he was forced to acknowledge that his present plight was entirely due to his own rashness and folly. He was beyond the help of man now ; not even a ruler so great and powerful as the famous Haroun Al-Rashid could be of the slightest service to him. It was hard to have to die in the flower

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of his manhood, and just when life had once more held out to him the glorious promise of freedom and of a career of distinction. But what except a miracle could save him ? A miracle ! The age of miracles was passed, he reflected bitterly. Then he suddenly remembered the words of the wise old man who had ridden by his side in the desert : " Fairies, ghosts, djins, demons, good spirits and bad, they are and they are not, even as we are and are not ; but, my son, live faithfully up to the faith that is in you."

Saïd's fingers eagerly searched the folds of his girdle ; it was some time before he had the satisfaction of at last touching the little whistle, and he carefully drew it out. Once again he applied it to his lips and blew his hardest. Whether it was the whistle or merely the shrill blast of the wind in the rigging that he heard, he did not know, but before he could blow again, and as though in scornful derision of his childish trust in a vain thing, a furious squall smote the ship with a voice of loud laughter, and hurled Saïd into the raging waters.

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VI

THE GREAT CALIPH

Saïd was lying on a rock when he slowly came to his senses again. The sullen moaning of the sea aided him gradually to remember what had happened to him, but he refused to believe that he could still be alive after his terrible experiences in the water. Recovering himself sufficiently at length, he sat up to look about him. He found himself on the slope of a great mass of rock that stood isolated within a mile or two of the shore. It was morning, judging by the position of the sun in the sky, and a fresh breeze was blowing ; but the violence of the storm had abated, and the waves were settling down to calm. He was badly bruised about his arms, legs, and head, but had marvellously escaped serious damage. Wondering what he was to do, he crawled painfully to the highest point of his rugged little island to scan the coast-line. The prospect was not encouraging, for there was no sign of human habitation along its waste, dreary length. He was reckoning up his chances of swimming to land, when he caught sight of a white speck detaching itself from a distant bend of the shore. He fixed

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his straining eyes upon it ; it was a ship, and, to his unspeakable joy, it was quickly bearing down towards him, favoured on its course by a following wind.

Yes, there could be no doubt about it. The ship was a big trader, and must pass within a few cables of the rock. Saïd stood up, and, as the vessel neared him, he yelled, and shouted, and frantically waved his arms. His strenuous efforts were happily successful in attracting the attention of the look-out ; the sails were brought up, the ship's way arrested, and a boat launched. Saïd scrambled down from his height, was soon dragged into the boat, and safely conveyed on board the vessel.

Battered and dishevelled though he was, his distinguished dress, no less than his handsome features and refinement of speech and manner confirmed the account he gave of himself as a gentleman who had been shipwrecked on his voyage to Balsora. The Captain and his crew treated him with all the kindness and consideration that his misfortunes, coupled with his exalted station in life, could demand, the only drawback to his happiness being that the ship was bound with an important cargo of Indian merchandise for Bagdad. Saïd eagerly sought to

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persuade the Captain to turn aside in his course and land him at Balsora, where he could promise him great reward ; but, owing to the delays caused by bad weather during the greater part of the voyage, this was impossible.

It was therefore with very disquieting feelings that Saïd awaited the first glimpses of the city in which he had spent a miserable life, and where nothing but further shame and degradation awaited him.

He was preoccupied one evening in the cabin with the various schemes that had occurred to him from time to time for eluding observation on landing and for finding his way somehow to Bálsora, when the ship's anchor was unexpectedly dropped. Hurrying on deck, where the crew was busy lowering sails, he was surprised to find no sign of wharves and warehouses, but a quiet, pleasant scene of summer residences, nestling among woods, whose leafy trees dipped their overhanging branches into the cool eddies and currents of the broad River Tigris. In answer to his inquiries why they had stopped, the Captain told him they were three hours below Bagdad, that it was too late to put into the port that night, and that he had therefore decided to heave to and continue the journey at daybreak. Being in a talka-

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tive mood, the good-natured seaman drew Saïd's attention to their picturesque surroundings, explaining to him how wealthy the inhabitants on those banks were, and how they had been attracted thither in order to be in proximity to the summer palace of the Caliphs of Bagdad, the lights from the windows of which, within a bow-shot of their anchorage, were already beginning to star the growing darkness.

"The Caliph must surely be down for the hot months, then?" Saïd remarked.

"No doubt he is, judging by all that illumination," was the reply.

"Look here, Captain," Saïd continued, quickly collecting his scattered wits after a brief pause, "I hardly know what opinions you have really formed of me, but, as it happens, you have in saving me saved the life of a man who has particular claims on the consideration of the mighty Haroun Al-Rashid. I promised you rewards if you took me to Balsora, but I think I can promise you fortune if you will believe what I tell you, and if you will row me across to that palace before you weigh anchor to-morrow morning. Your name is . . ."

"Mustafa el Bahri, sir, master mariner of Bagdad."

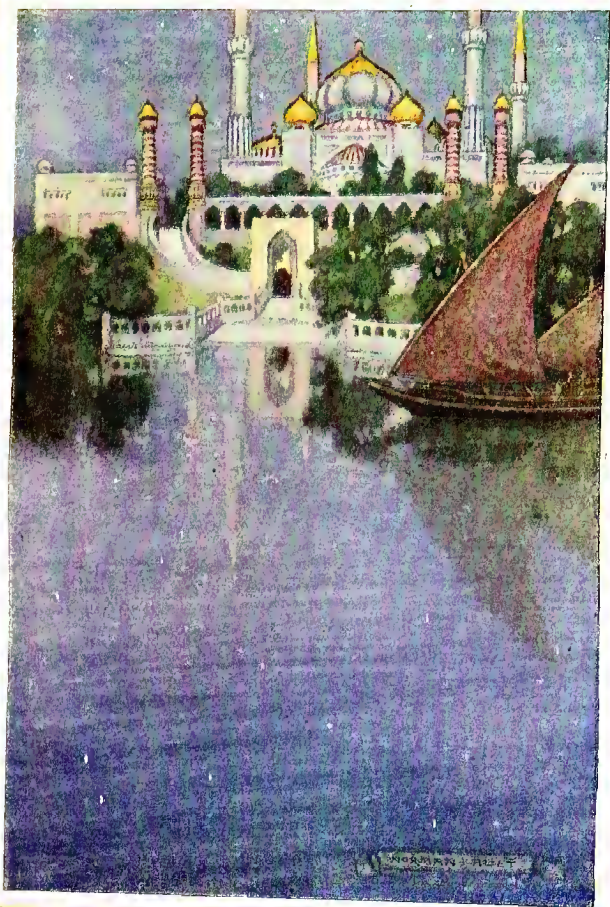
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“ Well, Mustafa, do you agree to my request ?”

“ You shall be on the Caliph’s landing-stage before I draw up-river. Whether you are what you say you are and can advance me in life or not, is neither here nor there. After having had the pleasure of delivering you from danger it would ill become me not to obey your wishes.”

“ I thank you from my heart, generous Captain, and in order that you may recognise any message I may have occasion to send you as coming from me, look carefully at this little bit of jewellery, and do not hesitate to answer the call of ‘ the Golden Whistle.’ ”

It was still dark when Mustafa roused Saïd from his fitful slumbers and conveyed him to the marble steps of the Caliph’s boat-stage. Stepping ashore, he bade the Captain farewell, and, stealing among the trees and bushes, he worked his way cautiously up to the broad terrace in front of the mansion. Hour after hour went tediously by, and, although there was every sign to encourage him in his hopes that the Caliph was at hand, Saïd began to fear at last that he had been unwise in choosing this particular method of approaching the great ruler. He was just contemplating a move towards the other side of the house, when two



*"The Summer Palace
of the Caliph."*

The Great Caliph

men stepped out on to the terrace and walked gravely up and down in earnest conversation. Saïd watched them closely ; the features of neither were familiar to him, but it was certain from their outward manner that the younger of the pair was of more exalted station than his companion. Was he the Caliph and the other Munsoor, the First Chamberlain ? Saïd wondered, for it was the thought of that highly-placed relative of Kalum-Beg's that worried the unhappy youth most of all.

The sedate gentlemen had paced the front of the mansion several times, when a tempting seat in the shade of the trees that hid Saïd attracted their notice, and they ushered one another into it.

“ Grand Vizier . . . ”

The words were barely uttered, when Saïd, holding out his ring, broke from his retreat and flung himself at the feet of the startled speaker.

“ Young man, who are you ? ” the Caliph asked, mustering up all his dignity.

“ The ring, my Lord—your ring will tell you.”

“ My ring ! ” was the rejoinder.

“ Yes, great Caliph. Take it and look at it.”

“ The man who saved your life, gracious

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Master!" came from the astonished Grand Vizier.

"The man who saved my life was bidden to meet me on the morrow," was the somewhat stern reply.

"He might have obeyed your Majesty's commands if he could have done so with safety."

"What do I hear?" the Caliph exclaimed in a voice of thunder.

"The truth, your Majesty!" and Saïd then poured out the whole story of his life.

The story was long, but never was Saïd to recount it to more attentive listeners than to Haroun Al-Rashid and his trusted First Minister.

"And here I am flattering myself that the meanest subject of my land is free, and has justice done to him. Vizier, what a fool I am! Saïd, young man, you have saved my life! It was something, but the thanks I owe you for that can bear no comparison with the debt under which you have placed me in teaching me my duty. I will be a friend and father to you. Arise, and follow me!"

The Caliph entered the palace, led Saïd to the royal apartments, and, summoning his attendants, ordered that the young man should be supplied with all he required to

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refresh and restore himself to his personal comforts ; that he should also be furnished with clothing from the princely wardrobe, and housed as a privileged guest in a suite of state rooms. This done, the Caliph retired to consider the measures he proposed to take in order to right the wrongs the young man had suffered, and to assure his future well-being.

It must have been some two days later that Haroun Al-Rashid, still undecided in his mind about the course he should pursue with regard to Saïd and his story, was sitting in his hall of audience, surrounded by his court, administering the open justice for which his reign was famous.

He had disposed of various cases, when, to his great astonishment, his First Chamberlain, Munsoor, stood forth in the place of appeal.

“ Commander of the Faithful ! ” Munsoor began, with a deep obeisance, “ my cousin, Kalum-Beg, a notable merchant in the bazaar at Bagdad, is waiting without to submit to your Majesty’s wisdom and decision a peculiar dispute that has arisen between him and a man of Balsora, the father of a boy who served in the merchant’s shop, robbed him, and then ran away. This man, having traced his son’s wanderings to Bagdad, now claims, most unreasonably, that Kalum-Beg

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should do what, through the boy's own wicked fault, is impossible—namely, restore his son to him.”

The Caliph's brow was knitted, and a dark expression settled on his features as he listened to Munsoor's plaint.

“Tell your kinsman, First Chamberlain, that he is to appear before me with his suitor in half an hour's time,” the Caliph said; then, turning to the assembly, he added as he left his seat: “the court is meanwhile adjourned.”

Haroun Al-Rashid withdrew to his private apartments, hastily summoned Saïd, and thus addressed him :

“My son, I have been sorely perplexed how to dispose most fairly of the matters concerning you. Allah is great, for he has mercifully given me the opportunity of exercising the wisdom with which he has endowed me to the overthrow of greed, malice, and deceit, and the triumphant assertion of justice and innocence. Come with me now to the hall of audience; conceal yourself behind the curtain at the back of my throne. Keep perfect silence, no matter what you hear, and promise me that you will remain hidden until you hear me call your name.”

With a heart beating loud with excitement,

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Saïd followed the Caliph's steps, and took his place behind the curtain, while Haroun Al-Rashid reappeared in the assembly, and sat down on his throne.

"Let the disputants enter!" the Caliph commanded, and a hush, only to be broken presently by the shuffling of two pairs of feet, fell on the crowded chamber.

Various formalities then being gone through, Saïd was almost paralysed to hear the harsh, raucous voice of Kalum-Beg breaking the stillness.

"Commander of the Faithful, may it please your Majesty," the merchant began, "a few days ago I was standing outside my shop in the bazaar, when a town-crier, with a purse in his hand and this man at his side, came along, shouting: 'A purse of gold, a purse of gold, to the one who can give information of the whereabouts of Saïd of Balsora!' This Saïd, having been in my employ, I naturally exclaimed, 'Come here, friends; I think I can claim the reward!' whereupon this old gentleman, now so bitterly disposed towards me, approached with eagerness, and asked me what I knew about the youth. 'Are you Benazar of Balsora, the boy's father, sir?' I ventured to inquire, and, being joyfully informed that he was, I then

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told him how I had saved his son in the desert, brought him to Bagdad, and provided him with an occupation and generous maintenance. In the joy of his heart, Benazar gave me the purse, but when duty compelled me to add the rest of the story, how faithlessly Saïd had rewarded my kindness to him, how he had robbed me, and then deserted me, the old man suddenly turned against me, refused to believe me, and has been vexing and annoying me for days, demanding the return of his purse, and insisting that I should give him back his son !”

“ You have spoken, Kalum-Beg,” the Caliph sternly interrupted. “ I will now hear what Benazar has to say.”

Benazar, in a voice shaken by emotion, had little to tell except that Saïd, his son, was a noble-hearted, virtuous, and upright boy, and that, whatever faults of character he may have had or that his calamities may have induced, he could never have stooped to theft.

“ I speak as a fond father, great and mighty ruler of the faithful, but I will uphold the honour of my son to my dying breath against such a foul charge as this merchant makes.”

“ Kalum-Beg,” said the Caliph, “ I sup-

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pose when you were robbed you did your duty in denouncing the thief ?”

“ Verily, my Lord ! I took instant steps to hale him before a magistrate,” the merchant answered in a tone of self-confidence.

“ Who was the magistrate ?”

“ Kaïd Haleel, of the port.”

“ The same who appeared in the case I heard before this one ?” the Caliph asked of those about him.

“ Yes, my Lord,” was the reply.

“ Then he is within call.”

“ I am here, gracious Lord and Master,” came a voice from the ranks of the audience.

“ Stand forth, Kaïd !” the Caliph ordered, and resumed in due course. “ You have heard Kalum-Beg’s assertion. Do you remember the incident ?”

“ I do, your Majesty.”

“ I presume that when the young man was brought before you, you carefully inquired into the charge and examined the prisoner ? Did he confess his guilt ?”

“ No ; it was impossible to deal with him. He was in a state of violent excitement, and appealed to be heard by you.”

“ I do not remember to have seen him.”

“ My Lord, if every knave who demands judgment at your hands were to be admitted

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to your presence, you would have no time for your more exalted duties."

The Caliph mused awhile in thoughtful silence.

"But surely an appeal so urgent as this young man seems to have made ought to have justified some caution in dealing with his case." Then he continued, addressing Kalum-Beg: "You probably showed clear proofs of his crime; there were witnesses, no doubt, of the youth's guilt, merchant?"

"Witnesses!" Kalum-Beg said tremulously—"witnesses! No, my lord; what witnesses could have surprised so artful a thief as the man who was slowly robbing me day by day?"

"How much did he steal from you?"

"Three hundred gold pieces."

"It is a large sum. How did you recognise the money to be yours?"

"By the purse that contained it."

"Have you the purse?"

"Here it is, your Majesty," Kalum-Beg said, producing a purse.

"That purse yours?" cried the Grand Vizier, to the amazement of the assembly, when his eyes caught sight of the richly embroidered bag that was handed up to the Caliph.

The Great Caliph

“Why this unseemly interruption, Grand Vizier ?” the Caliph asked sternly.

“Most humbly do I implore forgiveness, gracious Master ; but that purse is mine, and I gave it with my own hands to a brave young man who saved my life in the streets of Bagdad one night.”

“Can you swear to it, Grand Vizier ?”

“As truly as I hope to enter the gates of Paradise. It was worked for me by my own daughter.”

“It seems, then, Kaïd Haleel, that you were falsely informed. Why did you believe the merchant ?”

“He swore it on his oath, and I dared not doubt the word of a recognised tradesman in the bazaar, who was also the kinsman of your First Chamberlain.”

The Caliph groaned aloud.

“This, then, is how a bad, deceitful man may hinder the cause of righteousness, and, shielding himself under the influence of a relative of whom he was unworthy, perjure his own immortal soul for the sake of passing gain and fleeting power.

“Kalum-Beg,” the Caliph continued, fierce wrath mantling his features, and making his voice terrible to hear, “where is Saïd ?”

“He was condemned to be transported for

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life to a lonely island," the merchant replied, trembling in every limb.

"Oh, Saïd ! Saïd ! my dear son ! that I should live to hear this !" Benazar sobbed.

"Kaïd Haleel," the Caliph asked, "has that lying merchant for once told the truth ?"

"Alas, your Majesty ! I am so distraught and confused I hardly remember anything . . ."

"Let us see if the young man himself can revive your memory. Saïd !" the Caliph called.

There was a tremendous stir in the hall when the youth, resplendent in his sumptuous robes, suddenly appeared before the eyes of all the beholders. The sight of his old father, utterly bowed down by the grief and sufferings he had endured, was too much for Saïd, and, rushing towards him, he clasped Benazar tenderly to his bosom.

Even the Caliph was moved to tears by the touching scene, and it was some time before he was sufficiently composed to conclude the case.

Kaïd Haleel was degraded from his office as a magistrate and banished from the city. As for Kalum-Beg, he was sentenced to forfeit his rights to trade in Bagdad ; the wealth he had unscrupulously amassed was held confiscated

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to the State for charitable purposes, and he was doomed to go out into the world and pray that he might find greater mercy for himself than he had been wont to show to others.

When all was over, Haroun Al-Rashid conducted Benazar and Saïd into the palace. He graciously bade them be seated, and then told the proud father how his son had saved two lives in the midnight streets of Bagdad.

“My life is not my own, Benazar,” he added; “in shielding it from a treacherous attack, Saïd preserved it, in the good-will of Allah, for the benefit of my people. The story of his deed shall be proclaimed in Bagdad, and I err grievously if a single murmur of disapproval or envy will grudge the favours which I propose to bestow on Saïd. In order that you, with your ripe stores of wisdom and learning, may be able to watch over him and guide him aright in his promotion to office and dignities, it will be necessary for you to live about my court. I will anticipate any objections you may be inclined to raise by telling you that it is only by consenting to my request that you can expiate that grave fault of yours which has been the cause of all your son’s trials and dangers. A dying woman, your own wife, commended this boy to your particular care till he was of full age; you pre-

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sumptuously disregarded her wishes as vain and superstitious. The fairy who visited her when this child of her sorrows was born was her own twin-sister, the daughter of Saïd Hassan of Damascus. She it was who brought him the charm that helped her to recognise him in the bazaar of Bagdad. It was her noble son, Ali Bey, whose mind she stirred to befriend him at the sports ground, an incident about which you will hear more in due course. It will astonish you, however, to learn that it was the life of that 'good fairy's' husband, my Grand Vizier, which Saïd was providentially to save when he saved mine; and you must remember that it was the Grand Vizier's purse which furnished the most damning evidence against that scoundrel Kalum-Beg. You see, I know something of the Golden Whistle, Saïd," the Caliph added playfully, addressing Saïd.

"Yes, my Lord and Master; but you do not know all. But for the Golden Whistle I should never have been here"; and Saïd told of his adventures on the rocky island and of the services Mustafa el Bahri had rendered to him.

"He shall be my State Barge-master, and live happily with you two," the Caliph promptly ordered.

The Great Caliph

In the days of gladness and prosperity that followed, Saïd never forgot the Golden Whistle. He learnt that it was only by blowing it gently that it uttered its shrillest notes, and though no fairies instantly answered its call, the memories it evoked grew daily more and more like the most fanciful fairy-story to which he had ever listened.

The
Wonder Child



I

DAME NOSE

ABDULLAH was a fellah, or peasant, who laboriously tended and cultivated a patch of land on the outskirts of Bagdad, and lived with his equally hard-working wife in a small village by the banks of the River Tigris.

The glorious days of the great Caliph Haroun were long since past and gone, and, although life could never have been easy for such as Abdullah, who directly inherited the curse of Adam to till the soil, the prosperity of the townspeople and the beneficent rule of order and security must have considerably lightened the toilsome lot of those who dug and sowed, weeded and watered, in order to bring the fruits of the earth to the city market in due season.

If legend as well as mere history could be trusted, too, those spacious times of peace

The Wonder-Child

and plenty were sweet with the records of magic and romance. Djins worked mightily on land and sea, and fairies tripped inside cottage doors as well as in and out of gilded palaces.

Life must have been worth living then, with the hope of the unexpected ever present to charm its dull monotony. As things now stood, however, day in, day out, it was nothing but work, work, work, for little profit and less prospect of improvement.

The want of money was bad in itself, but the want of a child was even worse. Abdullah and his wife should in all reason have been glad, perhaps, not to have to provide for other mouths than their own in times that were so hard, but they were simple enough to be sorely afflicted that there was none to take up their burden of toil and penury.

But still they prayed, and still they hoped, and just when they were beginning to fear with sorrow that a heavy curse rested on them, and that neither prayer nor hope would avail, a child was sent to cheer their aching hearts. A son he was, that greatest of divine blessings, and in order to signify their sense of gratitude, they named him Aghab the Wonder.

And a Wonder he really was, for he was as

Dame Nose

beautiful as he was lusty, perfect in every limb and feature, so happy of disposition that he was hardly known to cry, and so bright and intelligent that he quickly became the talk of the country-side.

Though Abdullah was proud of him, his wife was even prouder; in fact, the good man sometimes hardly knew whether he had any claim on his own son, for the boy's mother would not be a moment without him, and when she went to Bagdad market with her fruit and vegetables, she packed him up on her back while he was still an infant, stowed him among the baskets on the donkey as he grew heavier, and insisted on his company when he was old enough to trot along by her side.

"The boy is worth two loads of garden-stuff to us," she argued eloquently, when Abdullah remonstrated about the monopoly she was establishing with regard to the child. "He is called Wonder, and a Wonder he really is in the market. He stands in front of me, cries my wares, and nobody who ever passes can resist his face and refuse to buy of me. We are richer every day since I have had him at hand, and there is time for him to learn from you how to dig and sow, how to prepare the soil and water. Leave him to me, and be content with what I bring you in money!"

The Wonder-Child

And truly the woman was right, Abdullah was forced to admit in his heart, for his baskets always came back empty from the town, and what he had put into them in the morning was returned to him in very good coin of an evening, to say nothing of the little store of wealth which was steadily increasing for the Wonder-child in the shape of money-gifts for his good looks, his winsome ways, and his cheerful readiness, as he grew up, to help his mother's customers home with their purchases.

“He will be rich enough, if he goes on in this fashion for the next few years, to be spared the drudgery of garden-work,” the proud father fondly reflected, as he toiled the day long in dreary loneliness among his plants and fruit-trees; and fair visions of the future rose before his wearied eyes of the Wonder in that familiar plot of ground, enlarged beyond its narrow bounds, standing like a prince of gardeners among an army of zealous workmen, directing their labours, supervising their achievements, and daily growing more rich and prosperous for the love he inspired, and for the wisdom with which he ruled his enterprises.

It was in this hopeful frame of mind that Abdullah sped his wife and child on their

Dame Nose

way to Bagdad one happy morning in spring-time. The Wonder was a big boy now, quite twelve years old, and full of childish fun and frivolity. His father laughed to see his playful tricks of urging on the aging donkey's pace, and lingered with a strange fascination to watch mother and son gradually disappearing in the distance that marked the approaches to Bagdad. How glad would he have been of their company, but as they faded from view he turned back to the work of equipping them for their next journey.

The Wonder was more engaging than ever on that particular day, and when his mother reached her stand in the market he nimbly unloaded the beast, deftly arranged the baskets about her, and was lustily crying her goods, to the amusement and delight of all the passers-by.

She had sold of her choicest, and the Wonder had reaped his usual tithe of the benefits, when a decrepit old lady came hobbling past the stall.

"Any apricots to-day, madam?" the boy inquired in a somewhat roguish tone of voice.

"Apricots . . . ! Who sells apricots so early in the season?" the lady asked in sharp and querulous tones.

The Wonder=Child

“It is only the boy’s fun, my lady,” the mother hastened to apologise.

“Fun, indeed !” was the snarling retort. “Since when do sellers in the market try to add to the number of their customers by being funny at their expense ?”

The question was asked in a way that made the mother look more closely at the speaker. She had been selling vegetables for over sixteen years in Bagdad, but had never before seen that shrivelled-up figure among the ranks of the purchasers. The little lady presented a very curious sight ; she was almost bent double with age or infirmity ; the hands which supported her tottering frame on two sticks were almost like bird’s claws ; two cruel sharp eyes peeped out through openings in a veil which barely disguised a very long beak-shaped nose. So forbidding was the impression created by this uncanny woman’s appearance that the mother would have been glad if the little creature would have passed by her stall after administering her sarcastic reproof. To her horror, however, the old lady came nearer, and began to examine what was left in the baskets with inquisitive interest.

“What’s that you have got ?” she snarled, poking one of her sticks forward at a pile of greenstuff.

Dame Nose

"Young spinach, madam."

"Rubbish !"

"The best is sold . . ."

"What's that, then ?"

"All that's left of some small cabbages."

"Rubbish, too !"

"If you will honour me with an early visit next market-day, I will try to satisfy you."

"Hm ! More rubbish !"

"I will promise you of the best for the season."

"So you may, if I come near you again."

"It won't matter much if you keep away, Dame Nose !" the Wonder interrupted. He had been observing the little lady curiously, had followed the conversation, and was rather stung by the scanty notice paid to his mother's obvious attempts to conciliate an unusually difficult customer.

"Ah ! little boy, I had quite forgotten you," the old lady said with mockful tenderness. "As you seem to like my nose, I will take a fancy to your mother's cabbages. I can also do with the spinach ; and, really, now I come to look at her baskets, those little radishes would just give a relish to my supper. How much may I owe you, my good woman ?" she added, after she had

The Wonder-Child

stooped down and carefully selected the best of the vegetables.

The price was named and promptly paid. The money rang true as it was counted out, and, being more than the mother had expected to get for such leavings of the day's sales, she was inwardly congratulating herself on having had the best of the deal, when the difficulty of removing the stuff arose.

"I'm too old and feeble to carry such a weight of garden produce," the little lady remarked.

"Let me call a porter for you," the mother suggested.

"It is hardly worth while engaging a man for the job. These market porters are so exorbitant. Won't your merry boy oblige me? I dare say I can find a little bit of silver for him," the old dame said.

"Oh yes, I'll go with you!" the Wonder exclaimed, delighted at the prospect of sharing on his own account in an unexpectedly profitable stroke of business.

The mother was strangely reluctant this time about consenting to let her son go; still, as the little fellow had really been to blame in the first instance for the unpleasant impression she had formed of her customer, there seemed to be no sufficient reason why she

The House of Enchantment

should object to the boy going; besides, as she also inwardly reflected, it was never safe to judge people by their outward appearance, and the old lady might well be the very soul of goodness for all her forbidding looks and crabby temper.

The Wonder quickly put an end to further hesitation by neatly arranging all the purchases in one basket, which he gaily shouldered, and then, jokingly bidding the little lady make haste to show him the way if he was to be in time to accompany his mother home before nightfall, he followed her painfully tedious progress towards her house.

II

THE HOUSE OF ENCHANTMENT

Never before in all his errands about the thoroughfares of Bagdad did the urchin have such a devious course set him as he was now condemned to pursue. He might have prided himself once on knowing his way about the city, but he was taken on this journey, for the first time in his life, through such a maze of side-streets and alleys, under dark tunnels so long and low, and into quarters so dreary and desolate, that he was wholly bewildered.

The Wonder=Child

Besides, he was really getting quite tired of walking, and the load that was so light at first was becoming positively irksome to bear. He ought to have lost patience and refused to be dragged about any longer in this apparently aimless fashion, but he seemed to be under the spell of a weird fascination that strangely curbed him just when his naturally restive spirit was most inclined to rebel against taking another step forward.

At last, when his limbs almost refused to obey him, and his patience was utterly exhausted, his guide suddenly stopped outside the dingy front of a neglected-looking house.

Before the Wonder exactly knew how he had gained admission into it, he was standing on the floor, polished as smooth as the most highly burnished glass, of a wide hall or vestibule. Quick as thought his decrepit, halt, and limping leader had slid across its slippery surface, and he was stupidly struggling to reach her with his load, when he took a great slide, and would most certainly have come to sorry grief if a laughing pair of female servants, emerging from nowhere, had not suddenly hastened to support him.

Their voices were fresh and joyous, but looking at them, when he did at last feel his



*"He was horrified to see
a pair of repulsive creatures."*

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feet, he was horrified to see that they were a hideously wizened couple of repulsive creatures, whose features were drawn and distorted into beaklike shape.

A mischievous question as to whether they were birds, beasts, or fishes was on his lips, when the rasping voice of the old lady bade him empty his basket.

"I said it was all rubbish," she remarked, as, to his appalled senses, he found himself turning out a whole heap of indescribably loathsome odds and ends of garbage.

"My mother never sold you that stuff!" he indignantly protested.

"Didn't she, boy? Then how comes it here?" the old dame snapped out.

"But this is not what you bought from us!"

"I bought what you carried, and *that* is what was in your basket. Can you deny it?"

"We don't sell filth like this!"

"You sold me what you yourself brought into this house."

The Wonder looked and looked again.

"It's not possible!" he blurted out, the tears gathering in his eyes.

"You need not cry about it," the old lady remarked in somewhat softer tones. "Here it is, and I shall have to make the best of it,

The Wonder-Child

for I certainly can't trudge out again to-day. I'm as hungry as I am tired. Girls!" she added, "pick those things up, take them to the kitchen, and get my dinner ready at once!"

The ugly pair of servants hastened forward, scooped the purchases back into the basket with their misshapen claw-fingers, and mysteriously disappeared.

The Wonder watched their movements with curious interest, but they had no sooner vanished than he recollected that they had taken his mother's basket with them, and that before he could gain the street he must cross that treacherously smooth expanse of floor.

The queer old lady must have divined his perplexity from the expression of his face, for she broke into a kind of cackle, and said:

"Don't look so worried, little man! You'll get back to your mother soon enough. The girls will quickly be here with my food, and you may just as well see what a savoury dish they can concoct even from such stuff as you sold us. They will also bring back your basket and help you out of the house. Wonderful cooks, those girls, and as wonderful floor polishers! But for them I should have been dead long ago. They know exactly

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what is good for me to eat, and, though they have scrubbed the marble of the hall till it is like glass, they have practised walking on it so steadily that I can always rely on not breaking my neck over it when they are at hand to support me."

The boy felt strangely uneasy at heart, in spite of the more conciliatory tones in which he was addressed. He dared not look at the speaker, and ruefully measured the distance that separated him from the freedom of the open air. His legs were twitching to brave the dangers of that slippery floor and to make a desperate dash to escape from surroundings so uncanny and oppressive; but while he was still mentally calculating his chances of escape at the risk of a bad fall, ringing peals of laughter claimed his attention.

The pair of dreadful harpies were once more on the scene. They were more hideous than ever to look at, with their pinched features, long hooked noses, and parched and withered limbs and bodies, yet there was a ring of youth in the sweetness and merriment of their laughter and speech, and more than a wondrous sense of playful girlishness in the way they flitted hither and thither, making the necessary preparations for the meal they were to serve.

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The old dame was strangely indulgent to their frivolities. It was hard to believe they were mere slaves of her whims, though the mischievous way in which they artfully dodged out of too close reach of her hands and the angry scowl which every now and again swept over her cruel face were eloquent of the silent tyranny she exercised over them.

A hot and smoking dish was at last produced. Its appetising smell quickly aroused the latent pangs of hunger in poor little Wonder's tired and famished frame.

"Come and eat, boy !" the little lady said.

And eat he did, as he had rarely eaten in his life.

"Your mother's rotten cabbages and decayed spinach were not so bad, after all, eh ?" she cheerfully remarked, after he had dipped his fingers rather freely into the various savoury messes that were temptingly displayed before him.

The ministering harpies laughed queerly, but they were too horrid to attract his attention for a minute. He was asked to enjoy himself, and enjoy himself he would, even though his poor anxious mother was waiting for him in the market-place before she packed up and drove the lightly burdened donkey homewards into the country.

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What a lovely sleep he had had, too, after his delicious and satisfying meal! And, dreams of such adventures as surely the great Caliph, in his most whimsical moods had never enjoyed, though all the magicians of the east had conspired to transport their august master into the most airy realms of Fancy and Romance.

It seemed to him, as he thought of it all, that he had gently been spirited away into a curiously topsy-turvy kind of a world, where everything happened just as he would least have expected it to happen. The ordinary experiences he had gathered of life were worthless to guide or direct him. At one minute he was talking to ordinary human beings, but before he knew how, they were transformed into the most grotesque forms of birds or beasts, which promptly engaged in ridiculously extravagant antics and capers. A charming forest of well-grown trees suddenly shrivelled up into a crowded marketplace filled with diminutive performing elves, while the noisy precincts of a busy town were as quickly enchanted into a dense grove of whispering palms. Listening to the rustle of their waving plumes, he would just begin to overhear scraps of conversation that interested him, when they danced out of view,

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and left him staring vacantly at a kitchen-fire.

Whatever other memories of his travels through Dreamland recurred to his waking thoughts, it was curious that all his recollections of his fantastic experiences were always cut short by visions of kitchen-fires.

Hot they undoubtedly often were, and they took a deal of keeping up at times, but there was a strange attraction about them ; they helped him to do such absurdly impossible feats.

Rotten eggs, tainted meat, putrefying cabbages, withered-up lettuces, cankered turnips and carrots, mouldy rice and flour—what mattered it to him how bad the materials supplied to him were ? He had only to handle them this way or that, heap the charcoal up in his row of little furnaces, rake the fires till they glowed, and the most delicious dishes were ready at hand.

If at times he was wholly staggered by the demands made on his skill and ingenuity, two weird and birdlike creatures were always ready to inspire his failing courage and to urge on his despairing efforts.

He loathed them for their ugliness, and suspected the motives of the lively interest they took in his performances to be due to the

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relief his skill afforded them from duties that were properly theirs; still, he owed them some gratitude for developing his marvellous talents for cookery, while their chatter and laughter never ceased to exercise a wistful charm over him.

There was a haunting music of youth and beauty about their sweet voices. The prettiest girls in his native village never talked or laughed with anything like the joyous gaiety that was theirs; but how dreadful was the shock always, when, thinking himself deceived about their appearance, he was bold enough to look up at them! They were the most monstrously hideous beings he had ever set eyes on; his blood positively curdled at the sight of their deformed bodies, misshapen limbs, and horrible noses.

III

BEWITCHED

It was some time before little Wonder could really believe that he was awake, for his sleep had been so heavy and his dream adventures so vivid and exciting.

But there was that nasty slippery floor, and there, too, was his mother's basket to bring

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him to his senses. What would his poor mother be thinking of him, to forget all about her, and to keep her waiting for him while he had dawdled so long, and had been eating and sleeping on his errand ?

He picked himself up, though not without some effort, for he felt very stiff after his doze, and was stupidly awkward and ungainly in his movements. But he never hesitated for a moment what to do. In a trice he had somehow managed to stride safely over the treacherous floor of the hall, and, flinging the house-door open, tumbled breathless and reeling out into the street.

He could not help laughing at himself for a clumsy creature as he tottered in a top-heavy fashion from one side of the road to the other, now into this wall and now into that. He seemed to be all head and nose from the bumps he got on both, while he had apparently lost all use of his neck, and had to turn round bodily to see where he had come from and whither he was going.

He had been floundering hopelessly about in a labyrinth of deserted streets and by-ways that were absolutely unknown to him, when he emerged at last into the more frequented quarters of the town.

The sight of busy, moving throngs of men

Bewitched

cheered him, and steadied his uncertain gait. But he was soon perplexed by the promptness with which people opened a passage for him and by the talk he overheard about a singular dwarf with a big head, long nose, and horrid crooked back.

Like the mischievous, cruel, curious boy he was, he pressed forward ever more eagerly to see the monster everyone but himself was watching and ridiculing, but for the life of him he could see nobody and nothing to jeer or wonder at. It was a very ordinary crowd of human beings that met his gaze, and, being at last on familiar ground, the thought of his mother overcame his inquisitiveness and urged him to disregard the vulgar excitement of those around him.

And so it was that he at last came to the well-known market-place, to find his good mother sitting as usual among her baskets.

She looked very sad and strangely aged. There was no vestige of a smile on her face and no joy in her eyes when a customer approached her.

“What a wretch I am!” he mentally exclaimed, after watching her for a few minutes; and then, tearful and contrite, he sneaked up behind her, laid his hand affectionately on her arm, and said in his tenderest voice:

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"Mother dear, what ails you? Are you very, very angry with me?"

The woman quickly turned her head round, and then shrank back terrified from his touch, with a shrill cry of horror.

"You hideous little creature! What do you mean by talking to me?"

"Surely, mother . . ."

"Mother! How dare you 'mother' me?"

"But you are my mother, are you not?" the boy inquired timidly, alarmed by her look and gestures.

"Your mother, you misshapen, distorted, unholy imp! Your mother! I've had enough of grief and trouble in my life through such accursed frights as you once crossing my sight! Begone, I say, or I shall be mad enough to knock the breath out of your ugly little body!"

Her rage was so fearful, and the attitude she assumed so violent and threatening, that the unhappy little fellow had no alternative but to beat a hasty retreat.

For a while he lingered ruefully within a respectful distance of her, hoping against hope, as the time went on, that she would turn to look at him and recognise him. But she steadfastly refused to glance his way, and every now and again she would bury her face

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in her hands, till his kind heart broke to see her so changed, so sad, and so afflicted, and he stole away to weep in silence and to draw such poor comfort as he could from the bitter reflection that, either owing to his thoughtless delay in returning to her or through some extraordinarily sudden breakdown, the dear good soul had been deprived of her reason.

His own senses seemed to have forsaken him in the complete bewilderment caused by his mother's heartless conduct towards him.

It ought to have been late in the afternoon and in full time to go home when he reached the market-place, instead of which the scene before him bore all the signs of a busy forenoon.

Worried and perplexed, Little Wonder retreated to the quieter side-streets, to seek relief for his harrowed feelings, and to decide what he should do with himself, since his own mother had rejected him.

The only refuge he could think of was his home. It was a long way off; the lonely walk thither in the heat would be slow and tedious; still, what else could he do but trudge countrywards and so convince his distracted mother on her return at the end of the day that he was the child she had so barbarously spurned in the city?

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The midday sun was beating down hotly over the weary land when the boy at length stood outside the familiar house in which he had been born and bred.

He knew where the "lab'n," or sour milk, was kept, and, having refreshed his parched lips with a good draught of it, he passed out to the garden, where his father should be working.

Yes, there he was, the same father who had been so proud and so fond of him ; and yet not the same, for it was impossible not to notice that his back was less supple and the joints of his arms more stiff than had been their wont.

A horrible dread came over the boy, and he approached the toiling figure with furtive step and sad forebodings.

He had been standing at the gardener's elbow for full ten minutes before the man at last became aware of his presence, and turned a frightened look upon him.

" Good-day, kind sir ! How fares it with you ?" Little Wonder ventured to remark, after an embarrassing pause.

" Badly, my little man, badly !" replied the peasant in a somewhat strained tone of voice, which struck the boy with dismay.

" I am sorry to hear that ; but why so ?"

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he asked, hoping against hope that he might yet be deceived in his worst fears.

"Old age, master ; work is not so easy as it used to be."

"But it pays you, surely ?"

"It pays, Allah be praised ; but it is cheerless."

"Cheerless ! Money is always cheer."

"You're wrong there, little friend ; money is money, but it brings no cheer for lost happiness."

"You must really be very unhappy, then, to talk so sadly."

"You may well say so, for I have lost the light of my eyes, the joy of my life, and what should have been the stay and prop of my old age. I had a son once ; he was my only child. His mother and I had waited long enough for him, but he came at last, and brought us all the treasure of heaven and its blessings. A bright, lovely boy he was, brimful of life, as sharp as a needle, and as willing and helpful as he was quick and resourceful. I often think we loved him too fondly ; we certainly were more than wisely proud of him . . ."

The old man's voice began to break, and he paused to control his feelings.

"Your son is not dead, is he ?" Little

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Wonder asked, hardly knowing what he said in his utter amazement at having to stand by and listen to a grief he could not for the life of him comprehend.

"Dead! Who knows? He may be dead, he may be alive; but it is some seven years since he vanished in the streets of Bagdad, whither he had accompanied his mother, as was his wont on market-days. And this is what adds to the burden of my sorrows. The good woman is nearly out of her mind, and it is no use my trying to relieve her troubles, for she is tortured by the thought that she is responsible for our great loss. Often enough I used to pray her to leave the boy with me, that he might learn while young how to work in the garden; but she seemed almost afraid to trust him out of her sight, and he certainly got to be very useful in bringing her customers."

"Did you say it was *seven* years ago since your son was lost to you?" Little Wonder inquired nervously.

"Yes, little man, *seven* years; but why do you ask the question in that comically solemn fashion?" The old man drew himself up as he spoke, and fixed a searching look at the poor distracted boy.

If Little Wonder's eyes could have spoken

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they would have pleaded more effectively than any words he could utter for recognition. Unhappily, all the love and yearning they mutely sought to express were wasted on the strangely distorted vision of his father. The man should have seen that piteous appeal to be recognised; the sunshine of joy should have flashed on his worn features, and his arms should have been opened wide to welcome his lost son to his aching heart. But, alas! his aged face only grew sterner the longer he looked; then a smile began to creep round the corners of his mouth, and presently a loud laugh rang out in the solemn stillness.

“You’re the funniest little fellow I have seen for many a day!” the gardener exclaimed, stooping down to his work again.

“Why am I funny?” the boy asked, woe-fully perturbed in spirit, but seriously anxious to know what could have happened to change him outwardly, so that neither his own father nor mother might know him.

“Look here, master, I have had quite enough of you for to-day,” was the stern reply. “You can’t say I have not been very civil to you; I never remember to have spoken more confidentially to an utter stranger. The soft qualities of your voice

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betrayed me to a frankness that has eased my sorrows. It is good at times to hear in actual words what a troubled soul only listens to in silence. I mean no offence, but pass on if you have any pity for affliction in your nature. Let others, with less reason than I have to dare further calamity, tell you what you look like, and if you really do not know what made me foolish enough just now to laugh at you, go to the nearest barber and examine yourself in a looking-glass."

Little Wonder lingered for a few minutes till the tears began to dim his eyes, and his poor heart throbbed as if it must really break. Even if his courage had not entirely vanished, he could no longer trust his voice to utter what he fain would have spoken, and he therefore turned and went his way along the weary road back to the city.

Hard by the south gate of Bagdad was the well-frequented shop of Aziz the barber. The man had taken a kindly interest in him when he trudged in and out of the market at his mother's side, and had more than once laughingly promised to give him his first shave for nothing.

If business had not been slack, and Aziz otherwise engaged than in lolling outside his premises, Little Wonder might neither have

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remembered the man's friendly disposition towards him nor the parting advice given him by his father. But being suddenly reminded of both, he pulled himself together, and, with such assurance as he could command, he blithely approached the jovial-looking barber.

"You offered me a free shave once, Aziz, I have come to claim it," he said with a laugh.

"Goodness gracious me, my little man, what do you mean?" the barber exclaimed, looking him curiously up and down.

"I mean what I say!"

"Oh, is that it; then step in by all means, and let me shave off your pretty nose before I can see who you are and what is growing on your lip and chin."

"My nose, friend!"

"You are doubtless aware that you have such an unimportant thing as a nose, master!"

"I am aware of nothing that would justify you in being rude to me."

"Hoity-toity! A looking-glass is more in your line than a razor."

"Possibly."

"Well, just you step this way, then, and you shall have the use of the biggest glass I have."

Little Wonder followed the barber into the shop, where after some search, accompanied

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by many pleasantries and other buffoonery, Aziz at last produced a good-sized mirror and fixed it conveniently to the wall.

“Now, my most honourable, most worthy, and most respected patron, if it please your worship to see a sight that may trouble you as much as it amuses me, you are welcome !”

The barber stepped aside with mock deference, and the boy, looking up at the reflection, started back with a cry of horror.

“Hullo ! hullo ! What’s the matter ?”

“Take away that glass !”

“Take it away ! What do you mean ? Did you not ask for it ?”

“It’s one of those horrid things that distorts people’s appearance.”

“It’s nothing of the kind. You won’t find a better in all the city,” the barber exclaimed indignantly.

“Then you’ve bewitched it, or bewitched me.”

“Shame on you, you little monster ! Bewitched it ! How dare you say that ? It is just like the impish spite of your accursed brood to come to an honest man and blast his happiness by throwing the spell of your evil eye on him !”

“Be merciful to me, Aziz, be merciful as you yourself hope to obtain mercy ; let me



"Poor little Wonder! What a hideous spectacle he presented."

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look at myself once more in some other of your glasses," Little Wonder begged tearfully.

"Pick and choose where you like in the shop among all the mirrors you can find; they cannot all distort!" replied the barber, struck by the piteous tone of voice in which he had been addressed, and by the dumb fear lest the uncanny creature before him were possessed of the malign powers superstitiously associated with his kind.

Poor little Wonder! No matter where he looked, hanging mirror and hand mirror, all told the same tale of a ghastly, misshapen, hunched-up, repulsive, squat figure, carrying an enormous head that was made more dreadfully conspicuous by a huge hooked nose which wellnigh concealed an enormous mouth and an ugly protruding chin.

What a hideous, sickening spectacle he presented! Could he be surprised any longer that the mother who had so fondly idolised him for the fresh young charm of his beautiful face and figure should have been revolted by the claim he made to be her son, and that she should have shrunk with loathing from the touch of his hand?

What hands his were, too!

He had never thought of looking at them before. They were more like bird's claws,

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with their long, thin, crooked fingers and ugly sharp nails.

In his painful anxiety to know the worst of himself he adjusted the mirrors so that he might inspect himself all over from top to toe,

He was a horrid dwarf, a repulsive monster. a nameless terror !

His aching little pig eyes were almost starting out of their sockets, and his senses were fairly reeling at the extraordinary change wrought upon him when the barber, who had been closely watching his movements, suddenly broke in upon his reflections with a loud guffaw.

“ You may well laugh, Aziz ; if my heart was not too heavy I could perhaps laugh with you for what I am to myself and must seem to you.”

“ No offence, sir, I hope, no offence. I’m afraid I’m only very human, but I confess it did amuse me, accustomed as I am to minister to the vain instincts of my kind to see how interested *you* even could be in your personal appearance.”

“ Have pity, Aziz !”

“ My occupation teaches pity at every minute it employs me, master.”

“ The pity I ask is such as you were never called upon to exercise,” Little Wonder

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replied, moved by his sorrows to speak in language that astonished him.

“You shall have the pity you want if you will make me safe against your evil eye.”

“My eye is not evil, and will bring you no misfortune, Aziz ! Do you know why I address you thus familiarly by your name, and how it comes about that I seem to presume on a previous acquaintanceship with you ?”

“No, little man, no, and to be quite candid with you, that easy familiarity of yours is just what is most uncanny to me about you ; I do not like it,” the barber answered.

“Do you remember a little boy who used to come in and out of the South Gate on market days with Hilweh, the gardener’s wife ?”

“I do, and it’s many a long year since I have seen his pretty little face.”

“He was a fine child, wasn’t he ? And his mother was not wrong to be proud of him. . . .”

“No indeed ; few who saw him did not envy her for the boy ! I took a strange fancy to him myself.”

“Well, have you ever heard what has become of him ?”

“No one really seems to know, His mother

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either lost him in the market one day, or he was stolen from her. All anybody knows is that he has mysteriously disappeared, and the good woman has been so distracted ever since that it is impossible to discover from her what did actually happen to him ; she is sensible enough on every other subject, but the moment you mention her child she rambles off into the most incoherent stories, smites her breast and weeps and moans till it is painful to see."

"Poor dear mother!" Little Wonder groaned in spirit.

"What did you say?"

"My heart is torn with grief for my mother."

"Your mother! What do you mean?" the barber cried aghast.

"I mean, what I see you will refuse to believe. I am the lost son of that sorely afflicted woman."

A great wild laugh rang out in the empty shop, and Aziz fairly capered about to relieve his feelings.

"What a lovely story! Keep your pretty little eyes off me; look at yourself again in all my mirrors, but *do* let me enjoy myself for once as I never have done in my life before. I can't help thinking what *your mother* would

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have to say to you if you told her the tale you are telling me. . . . There would be some danger to your little eyes, I'll warrant!" the barber remarked, when he had sufficiently recovered his breath to speak at all.

"You promised me pity, Aziz ; well, then, let me tell you my story. If you can laugh after hearing it, I will not grudge having thoroughly amused you."

"Tell me anything you like, master ; but upon my word, you would be a fortune to me if you would tickle my customers' ears as you have tickled mine. I will give you as good a job as you can hope to get in the city if you will show yourself outside my shop till you have gathered a crowd, and then attract them in to listen to your talk."

"Hear me out first ; who knows that afterwards I may not be glad to accept your offer of employment. I might well go farther and fare worse than in your service."

The barber, being at last moved to attention, now heard a story which made his ears burn and fully cured him of all desire to laugh.

"This is too horrible if it is really true !" he exclaimed with terror-stricken looks, when the boy had slowly and carefully narrated the details of his weird experiences.

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"It is true, Aziz!" Little Wonder cried in imploring tones. "Oh, do believe me! . . . what purpose could I have in deceiving you? . . ."

"Hush, little man! hush! and be off for the present; here is Kadi Mahmood coming to be shaved, which reminds me that I must begin to attend to my business."

The barber had scarcely finished speaking when a venerable and distinguished old man stepped into the shop.

IV

COOK TO THE KADI

Little Wonder tried to steal out unobserved, but he was somewhat clumsy in his movements, and the Kadi fixed his eyes curiously upon the ungainly figure that shambled so awkwardly past him.

"That's a funny customer of yours, Aziz. I never remember to have seen him here before," the old gentleman remarked, as he sat down and disposed himself to receive the barber's attentions.

"A very disturbing customer, I assure you, my Lord," was the reply.

"I should think so! I don't know that I

Cook to the Kadi

have ever seen a more misshapen and repulsive looking monster in the whole of my life."

"Nor I either; I could wish that he had never set foot in this shop of mine."

The Kadi did not fail to notice a slight tremble in the barber's hands, and, glancing inquisitively upwards, was struck by the anxious look on the man's features.

"Your uncanny little fellow seems to have upset you, Aziz. Did he come and ask you to shave off his big nose?"

"No, my Lord, till he had examined himself in my looking-glasses he did not even suspect that he was in any way an extraordinary and loathsome being!"

"You are joking, Aziz!"

"May mirth never again bring laughter to my lips if I am not telling your worship the truth."

"What did he think he was like to look at, then?"

"The comeliest child of twelve years old that ever passed through the South Gate of Bagdad, with the proudest of market-women for his mother."

"You don't say so?"

"I do, my Lord, and as regards that part of his story he spoke truly. It was common talk in the city that there was no fairer boy in

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Bagdad than the little chap who was called 'The Wonder-child' on account of his bright looks and brighter spirits, and it is even more common talk in the market to-day that seven years ago he mysteriously disappeared and has never since been seen or heard of, that his once happy mother now sits disconsolate and well-nigh bereft of reason by the garden-stuff, which the mere necessity of providing herself and her husband with a livelihood compels her to sell, and that if she has any heart left in her it is because she still hopes to regain the treasure of a child she somewhat carelessly lost."

"You astonish me, Aziz ! And I, a Kadi of Bagdad, have never even heard this amazing story ?"

"But there would seem to be witchcraft in this particular case, my Lord !"

"Witchcraft ! Witchcraft !" the excited Kadi exclaimed, rising and stamping furiously on the floor. "This is worse than ever ! Witchcraft in Bagdad, and I not told of it ! Speak, man, tell me what has happened !"

Though taken aback for the moment by the Kadi's wrath, the barber did his best to recount word for word the amazing story Little Wonder had told him.

"By the Holy Prophet, this is indeed

Cook to the Kadi

enough to make a man's ears tingle," the old gentleman remarked, when Aziz had finished speaking. For a long time he sat gravely and thoughtfully stroking his long white beard.

"The little fellow says he has gained some wondrous skill as a cook during the seven years of his enchantment?" he asked at length.

"Yes, my Lord."

"To test this skill would therefore be the surest way of proving whether the adventures he claims to have had did really befall him.

"You have spoken wisely, my Lord."

"Bring the creature to me. As Kadi it is my duty to investigate the mystery of this occurrence, and I will investigate it to the bottom. I am shortly entertaining my royal master, the Caliph. His Majesty is a hard man to please in the matter of food; your monster shall then have such an opportunity of displaying his cooking powers. . . ."

"My Lord! my Lord!" exclaimed the terrified Aziz, throwing himself down on his knees before the Kadi.

"What ails you now?"

"Surely, my Lord, that horrid dwarf has after all cast the spell of his evil eye on me!"

"How so, man?"

"What if he has lied to me? What if he cannot cook? What if his efforts to stand

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the test you impose upon him bring shame and disgrace to you ? Oh, I am undone ! I am undone ! for shall not the dishonour you suffer be visited on me to my utter ruin and confusion.

“ Nay, Aziz, you do me wrong ; be of good cheer ! You must trust me to act with prudence and discretion. You may leave yourself with confidence in my hands, but meanwhile be discreet on your part ; the less you talk about that dwarf the better it will be for you and for me.”

As the Kadi rose to go other customers began to drop in, and it was late in the evening before the shop was empty and the barber found leisure to think of Little Wonder.

He had in fact cleaned and put away his razors and scissors for the night, and had begun to hope that the gruesome dwarf had been spirited far enough away never to vex him again, when a squeaky little voice at his elbow uttered his name.

“ Oh, it is you, my beauty !” he said, controlling his feelings with all the playful grace he could command.

“ Yes, I have come to help you sweep up your shop, if you will let me, and to offer you my poor services for the morrow, if you are still minded to employ me.”

Cook to the Kadi

"No, no, my friend," replied the barber, "I have been thinking matters over, and have, after all, decided that you are no good to me."

"Oh, Aziz, please don't say that!"

"I say what I mean. You tell me you are a cook. What's the use of you to me, I ask you? I am not a confectioner; this is not a bakery or an eating-house. If you had said you had been apprentice to a doctor, could let blood, draw a tooth, or even sharpen a knife, I could have done with you. . . ."

"But can't I stand outside your shop and tempt people in out of curiosity to see me and talk to me while you shave them?"

"No . . . you would be better employed, with all due reverence, as a scarecrow, and do me less harm. You are a cook. . . ."

"And I spoke the truth. But what kitchen in Bagdad would give me a job now I know what I look like?"

"Could you cook if I got you a kitchen?"

"Cook! Here, Aziz, shall I make you a soup out of your shop sweepings; there's a lot of substance and juiciness in hair even . . ."

"Not if you know the heads and chins it comes from."

"But you would not know."

"Listen, young man—I suppose I may call

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you young man, if you are only nineteen years old—I am more than satisfied with my present personal appearance. I want none of your soups, and could have been well satisfied if you had never again darkened my doors ; but as you are here, what do you say to a job in the kitchen of the first Kadi of Badgad ?”

“ I would kiss your hands, Aziz, and say you were the only friend I had found in my trouble.”

“ Mind you, I have been a fool to concern myself with you and your affairs ; but what’s done is done.”

“ I can bring you no harm, Aziz !” Little Wonder cried, throwing himself tearfully at the barber’s feet.

There was no possibility of mistaking the sincerity of the poor dwarf’s feelings, for although he would have been ready as a wretched outcast to earn a living in the service of Aziz, the idea of advertising his loathsome figure in the most public way at one of the most frequented of shops in Bagdad had sorely wounded his delicately sensitive nature.

When the shop was at last swept and garnished, made ready for a new day’s work, and then safely locked up, the barber bade

Cook to the Kadi

his quaint helper follow him at a safe distance, and guided him in the gathering gloom to the Kadi's house.

There was an extraordinary scene in the great man's kitchen on the following morning, when the judge himself introduced Little Wonder to his head-cook and his astonished staff.

If insults, rebukes, scowls, and kicks could have driven the hapless little creature to ignominious flight, he would have disappeared for ever from the sight of his outraged associates in cookery; but he proved to be the very soul of quietness and good nature, and experience quickly showed that there was nothing baneful about him and that in spite of his woeful infirmities, there was no one who could work more nimbly and reliably than he. The fires had never burnt as brightly or the kitchen utensils shone as resplendently before he came. There was a positive magic in the ugly misformed claws that served him for fingers, and no scullion had surely been defter than he in coaxing a sullen hearth to glow, in burnishing the copper ware, or in scouring pots and pans. He was never tired of working, either, and with no temptations to hurry over his tasks in order to have more time to enjoy himself among his fellow-men out of doors,

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he could always be relied upon to scrub and polish, clean up and whiten, long after the day's labours were over, and thus save his companions in toil many weary hours of distasteful drudgery.

Though he got little thanks, indeed, for his usefulness, he was more than content when he began to notice the general tendency among his kitchen-mates to treat him with less suspicion and abhorrence.

Trying to forget all the wrongs he had been called upon to suffer, he was beginning to look forward with quiet resignation to a life of humble service and unrequited effort, when the news ran through the great house that the Kadi was to entertain the Caliph at a sumptuous repast, and that Hassan, the head-cook, was required to give proof of very special skill in the preparation of some altogether novel dishes.

For days that illustrious personage, clever and ingenious though he was, had been racking his brains and experimenting with all sorts of mixtures and messes to produce a masterpiece, but the more he tried the less he succeeded, so that his temper, which was never of the best, became in the end truly fiendish.

On the morning of the great day of the

Cook to the Kadi

banquet, the commotion in the kitchen was altogether so dreadful that Little Wonder, finding it impossible to get out of the way of the frenzied head-cook and his distracted minions, decided that it would be best for him to withdraw from a scene where his presence was unnecessary, and where he stood a good chance of being knocked down and trodden under foot.

As there was nothing for him to do elsewhere in the house and nowhere for him to go, he concealed himself and his ugliness as well as he could in the ample folds of a big hooded cloak and stole out into the street.

His first idea was to visit the market-place and have a peep at his poor mother, but, reflecting that this could only give him pain, and that he might expose himself to jeers and insults if he ventured into the more frequented thoroughfares, he slunk into the quietest by-ways and kept himself as much as possible out of observation, by walking on the shady side of the street. He must have dawdled along in this aimless fashion for two hours or more, taking no account of where he was going, when he came upon a tumble-down, blackened mass of stones and rubbish, that spoke, with grim eloquence, of some appalling calamity of fire. As he stopped to look at

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this ruin he seemed to hear a low wailing sound, and stepping inside a ruined doorway he saw a little, closely-veiled woman cowering on the ground, and weeping bitterly.

Moved by pity into forgetting himself, in his desire to relieve the woes of another, he advanced to the sufferer and kindly asked what was the matter with her.

The effect of his sympathy was to astonish and terrify him. Even as he spoke he could see the poor creature quivering with emotion ; then she jumped to her feet with an agonising cry, threw back the hood which concealed his features and peered into his face.

“ Aghab ! Aghab ! Little Wonder ! Can it be you ? ” she almost shrieked.

What a revolting sight she was, and how the boy shuddered to see her ! Who was she ? How did she come to know him ?

“ Don’t you remember me, Aghab ? ”

“ Remember you ? Remember . . . ? ” he gasped as his memory reeled back to that awful experience of his life. “ Are you Habeeba ? ” he asked at length, recalling the loathsome form of the only being in all that bewitched existence of his who had ever displayed the least semblance of regard and pity for him.

“ Yes, Aghab, I am Habeeba, accursed like



*"She dared not eat;
she dared not sleep."*

Cook to the Kadi

you, but doomed to witness the horrible end of that awful woman."

"Is she dead, then?"

"Look about you; this is all her cruel work."

"Her work?"

"Yes, soon after you went, a great change began to come over her. If she was petulant and irritable as you knew her, she gradually grew to be impossible. Nothing we could do would please her. Her mind was peopled with ghastly visions; she dared not eat because the food was poisoned; she dared not sleep because we were to kill her. All the powers of darkness must have been summoned to her aid, for the house was alive with the weirdest noises, and for days it seemed to rock and sway to its very foundations. But the nights were always the worst. It makes all my blood run cold to think of those awful nights! How we shivered and quaked! At last, just when mortal endurance could go no farther, the whole place heaved up suddenly, fire broke out, fiendish yells rent the air, and there was a terrific crash of stones and mortar. I alone seemed to have been saved in the wreck, for nothing besides me has stirred in this ruin these three days."

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“And why do you moan?”

“Because, till you came, I could not think what was to become of me. Now tell me, Aghab, where have you been all this long time? What have you been doing? Where have you been living?”

The poor wretch was so obviously overjoyed at the meeting, and her questions followed one another so fast and excitedly, that Little Wonder's heart went out to her, and he quickly told her the story of his unhappy adventures in the world without.

A strange joy gleamed in her eyes when he began to relate about his employ in Kadi Mahmood's kitchen, and about the dire confusion in which he had left the head-cook, Hassan.

“Look, Aghab, here is the horrible witch's cabinet! Do you recognise it?” she asked, producing the casket of little drawers from the folds of her garments. “Can you remember,” she pursued excitedly, “how its contents never failed us in our emergencies? I found it, happily intact, amid the ruins. It is all I have been able to save. Who knows that it may not be able to save us? Take me under your cloak, Aghab; we are a hideous pair, but if you will only befriend me, now I, too, am friendless, we may yet prepare the Caliph

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a dish that will bring honour to Mahmood, and some reward, perhaps, to our poor selves."

Much as Little Wonder disliked such close contact with a being even more unfortunate than himself, it was impossible for him to resist such coaxing, and, although he was hopelessly bewildered about the way he had come, the quaint pair of unfortunates did somehow or other find themselves in the Kadi's house well before sunset.

V

THE BANQUET

Hassan was alone in the kitchen. He was wild and well-nigh demented, for he had ruthlessly banished all his assistants and was at his wits' end to know how he was going to satisfy the exacting demands laid upon him.

Neither Little Wonder nor his companion spoke a word. They just quietly set about making up the fires, laying the kitchen utensils in order under his hands, and deftly sorting out and preparing the meats and vegetables that were to be cooked.

The absolute silence of their movements and the skilled manner of their work gradually restored the distracted man to his senses.

The Wonder-Child

“You’re a queer pair of frights to be helping me so marvellously in my plight. Upon my word, I don’t quite know what I am to think of you !” he said, in the first moment he could spare for speech.

“There is no time to stop and think, master !” Little Wonder ventured to remark in reply, as he thrust a saucepan full of dainty meat patties, which Habeeba had cunningly fashioned, into the astonished cook’s hands.

“You are right, little friend, for the waiters are already coming down to fetch the first dishes,” Hassan said, devoting himself with feverish haste to his arduous task at the long row of ovens before him.

Never in all his life had the man worked more strenuously or continuously, yet never, too, with greater zest and freedom from anxiety.

There was an extraordinary method and regularity about the way one course after another was quietly served up, and when the last had been presented the poor man would have sunk down exhausted in his kitchen, but for the command that he was instantly to repair to the banqueting hall.

Hardly knowing whether disgrace or honour was awaiting him, the anxious cook was

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ushered trembling into the glittering scene of royal splendour and beauty.

A great clapping of hands welcomed his appearance, and it was prolonged till the Kadi, rising in his seat, brought the applause to an end.

“Hassan, prince of all cooks, my royal Lord and Master, King of Kings, and Caliph of Bagdad, has signified his gracious pleasure that I should thank you in his name for doing honour to my humble house by the way you have gratified his delicate palate and the grosser appetites of his servants here assembled to share the privilege of his exalted company.”

Hassan raised his head for an instant and cast his dazzled eyes about him.

“May I speak, my Lord?” he asked at length, breaking the deep silence that followed a long outburst of cheers.

“You may, Hassan.” The voice was the Caliph’s this time.

“If thanks there be for the cooking that has pleased Your Majesty, such thanks are due to Heaven, not to me, for surely I have been blessed in the last moment of a great despair with help I neither expected nor deserved.”

“You speak in riddles, Hassan,” the Caliph exclaimed.

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“How else should I speak of a mystery such as I beg leave to doubt has not happened in this glorious city of story and romance since the fabled days of the mighty Haroun Al-Rashid ?” Hassan asked, bowing himself to the ground.

“What is this we hear, Kadi ? Are the splendid annals of my famous ancestor’s reign to be revived in our more dull and commonplace days ? That would indeed be a sign of divine approval.”

“My Lord, Allah grant that what Hassan can tell us may justify our belief that Bagdad, under your benign sway, is worthy to regain its fame as the home of fairy-story and marvel.”

“Well said, my trusty Mahmood. You have heard, Hassan. Speak now, that we may understand, and that the enjoyment we have had from your cookery may acquire relish from the details of a good old-fashioned story of exciting adventure !”

The Caliph’s words found a ready echo in the hearts of all his listeners, and prostrating himself dutifully, Hassan then began to narrate in simple, honest, and unsparing detail what had happened in his kitchen.

“My rage was beyond endurance,” he freely admitted, “and when I had driven one by

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one of my assistants out of my reach, I was left alone to face the stupendous ordeal of worthily feasting the master of my Lord. Then it was that a disgusting little dwarf, whose presence among my staff had done more than anything to sour my life for days and weeks, suddenly appeared to help me. And, strange to say, he was not alone, or was able in some mystic manner to double himself before my eyes. If he was ugly and forbidding, the other part of him was even uglier and more hideous, and yet never have I known such helpers as they were to me. It makes me shudder to think of them ; but how they worked and what they were able to do for me is beyond any power of language in me to describe. I only cooked what they prepared. Whatever was toothsome, novel, and really deserving of praise in the repast that has been laid before you, is of their doing, and that I may repay the debt I owe them, call them into your august presence, my Lord Caliph, and thank them on my behalf, as you only can, for enabling me to give you satisfaction."

The story was altogether so amazing, that as soon as it was ended the Caliph commanded the two mysterious creatures to be summoned before him.

There was a deep hush of anxious expecta-

The Wonder=Child

tion in the brilliant banqueting hall while the messengers hastened to the kitchen to carry out the Caliph's orders.

When the silk curtains that hung before the entrance to the chamber were at last parted and Little Wonder and his companion appeared before the eyes of the assembled guests, cries of astonishment mingled with disappointment suddenly broke the stillness.

"Hassan! What does this mean?" the Caliph exclaimed in rage.

The poor cook was utterly aghast to see before him a lovely, delicate-looking flower of a girl, clinging timidly to the side of a fine, handsome fellow in all the pride of youth and beauty.

"Who are you?" Hassan gasped in a state of breathless stupefaction.

"Your poor servants in the kitchen, master."

"This is magic, my Lord, or I am undone!" the distracted cook exclaimed. "The creatures that helped me were horrors of ugliness such as you have never seen. Kill me, if you disbelieve my words, but what I did tell you was the truth!"

"Are you the impossible monsters of whom Hassan has told us, and who helped him to prepare so good a feast for us?"

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For the first time Little Wonder and Habeeba looked at one another, and then shrank apart, terrified and amazed, and wholly confounded by the extraordinary change that had taken place in them.

“Habeeba!”

“Aghab!”

“You . . . ?”

“You . . . ?”

Neither of them seemed to have a thought of the circumstances in which they were placed and of the necessity they were under to justify the marvellous change each had undergone.

They were absolutely alone to all outward seeming and to the breathless interest of the exalted spectators about them.

“Where are your claws, Habeeba?”

“And your nose, Aghab?”

“My nose . . . ! Upon my word . . . it has vanished!” Little Wonder exclaimed, passing his hand up and down his face. “Just look at your feet!” he remarked excitedly.

“Feet . . . ! Feet . . . ! What feet . . . ?” the girl cried, and, peering downwards, she realised with amazement that she really was standing once more on a pair of human and altogether shapely feet. In her joy she began to dance round the astonished youth.

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“ You’ve got feet, too, Aghab !”

He looked, and was soon whirling round with her in the giddiest of mazes.

“ Am I really a decent human being ?” he asked at length, in the pause of a tumultuous dance.

“ As truly as you see any charm of girlhood in my despised and hideous form,” was the answer.

“ You are a fairy of beauty, Habeeba !” he cried.

“ And you the pride of manly comeliness, Aghab !” she exclaimed, sinking, dazed and exhausted, to the ground.

* * * * *

“ Kadi Mahmood !” the Caliph said after an interval, during which he and all around him had been wrapt in mute astonishment at the scene enacted before their bewildered eyes. “ Kadi, by the Holy Prophet, this is none other than magic !”

The solemn tones of his deep voice broke the spell of stupefaction that had enthralled the handsome boy and his lovely companion in an attitude of amazement.

“ Where are we, Aghab ?” the girl said, darting lightly to her feet, and huddling prettily up to her stalwart friend.

The boy started, put his arm round her

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graceful, shrinking figure, as if to protect her, and resolutely faced] the distinguished assembly.

The sight that confronted him, now that he could see, might well have staggered a braver heart than his. As out of a dream, he recalled the hazy visions of a great festivity and a lordly banquet to the mighty Commander of all the Faithful, and, blinded by the glitter and splendour about him, and the crowds of eager faces bent upon him, he was struck dumb with surprise and awe.

“Speak, boy!” the Caliph cried cheerily, in order to help him out of his confusion.

“Yes, speak, Aghab!” the girl at his side whispered coaxingly.

“But who will believe, since I can no longer believe myself!” the youth exclaimed.

And Aghab was right; for, though he told his story so that none who heard him could fail to be moved by his words, his hearers parted in the end with incredulous looks at one another as the dawn was tipping the domes and minarets of Bagdad with its rosy fingers.

Even poor Abdullah, the gardener, and his sorely tried wife were more amused than convinced when their long lost son came back to their desolate home accompanied by his lovely bride, bringing such a tale of

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adventure as their simple ears refused to credit.

Happily or unhappily—who shall say?—as Aghab often had occasion to remark to his devoted Habeeba, the age of Djins, fairies, witches, good and evil spirits, was gone for them.

The city of Bagdad calmly pursued its wonted course of business and pleasure with little more than a shrug of the shoulder and a sly wink of the eye at the stories which spread from the shop of Aziz, the barber by the South Gate.

Though Mahmood, the Kadi, and Hassan, his chief cook, were ready at all times to confirm the details Aziz gave, a careless, matter-of-fact world, out of all sympathy with the mysterious poetry of Life, scoffed frivolously at a story which somehow inculcated the lesson that Age and Infirmary were always worthy of the deepest respect and consideration.

The Rusty Key



I

THE BOY AND THE STRANGER

MANY, many years ago, when the world was much younger than it is to-day, the harbour of Balsora, now so deserted and forlorn, was crowded with ships that poured the wealth of the east on its busy wharves and quays ; for Balsora was the sea-port town of Bagdad, and Bagdad was then among the richest and most famous cities on the face of the earth.

But although things have changed very much since those dim, early days of which legend rather than history has preserved some records for us, whatever else we may choose to doubt or be unable to explain, or even to understand, we may be certain of one thing—namely, that the people who lived in those times were, after all, very much what the people about us now are : they were good and bad, wise and foolish, honest and dishonest,

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just and unjust, because, ever since the world began, man, who has done so much to transform it, has never been able to transform that strangely constant element in himself which we call Human Nature.

It is fortunate, in some ways, that this should be so, otherwise what possible interest could there be for us in old Balsora, with its crowded harbour, and in the life of a little boy, named Ali Hamed, who was the joy of a poor carpenter, working in one of the largest ship-building yards of the prosperous town.

Ali Hamed was outwardly a very ordinary type of boy, and in no respects unlike any other healthy child of his age in his love of fun or mischief; but, hidden away in the depths of his being, all unsuspected even by himself, there were qualities of heart and mind which were gradually to distinguish him with a stamp of his own.

The first indication his fond father was to have that his son was differently gifted from himself, was to discover that the boy had no aptitude whatever in the handling of adze or hammer, chisel or file.

With a view of fostering a desire in the youngster to become a skilled carpenter, the man had taken the lad along with him to his work from his tenderest childhood; but,

The Boy and the Stranger

interested though Ali Hamed could not fail to be in his father's cunning, he never showed the slightest disposition either to imitate or to emulate it.

The father hoped against hope that, with time and patient perseverance, the true spirit of carpentry might ultimately be stimulated in the youngster, but all in vain. Ali Hamed was glad enough to spend his time in the company of so affectionate a parent as Providence had given him, but sharp tools were an abomination to him, and he never touched them without disastrous results to his hands and fingers.

"Strange that the boy should be so clumsy," the father was wont to muse, when called upon time after time to bind up a fresh wound ; but, like the sensible man he really was, he began to add the sober reflection to his remark that clumsiness was, after all, the best proof of uselessness.

Ali Hamed was therefore wisely allowed to go free. His father would have made a carpenter of him ; if he was not to be a carpenter the great Allah, who knew best, would be able to determine what was to be his future, and meanwhile his own simple duty as a father was to work and work, and pray even more diligently of a Friday at the mosque, that health and strength might be given him to

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earn his wages and to provide for the wants of himself, his wife, his big family of daughters, and, above all, for the maintenance in apparent idleness of his only son.

This good father's employer, who was a wealthy citizen of the town, had meanwhile often noticed the boy in the shipyard, and had been struck by his appearance ; and one day, a mere chance giving him the opportunity, he smilingly patted the lad on his bare head, and got into conversation with him. Having ascertained his age—Ali Hamed was about fifteen at the time—what he did with himself all day long, who his companions were, and why they were so few, the worthy man was tempted by the keenness of the boy's intelligence to ask him whether he had formed any views about the future.

"I want to be rich, sir," was the unhesitating reply.

"Is that the best thing you can think of?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I know what it costs my father and what it will cost me to be poor."

"Riches do not make happiness."

"Nor does poverty."

"They tell me the poor are the happiest because they have no cares."

The Boy and the Stranger

"Don't believe it, sir. To be poor is curse."

"But I should be sorry to say that rich were a blessing."

"I would rather be rich than poor, all the same."

The shipbuilder was more deeply impressed than he himself imagined at the time, for he just laughed good-naturedly and went his way. But, although a boy of fifteen in Baghdad was much older for his years than a boy of his age would be in England, even in the more forward days, and might almost be called a man, there was something strange and unnatural about a little fellow like Al Hamed setting the desire for riches above all other objects of ambition.

Most boys in every age have admiration for greatness, honour, and renown. Mere wealth as such does not appeal to them. But he was a lad who sought wealth first, and evidently thought little about the manner in which it might be got, or about the honour that might be obtained for himself in the getting of it.

It was some weeks later that an animated and friendly discussion about boys in general having arisen at the principal baths, the shipbuilder had occasion to relieve his mind about

The Rusty Key

his conversation with the son of one of his carpenters.

The talk drifted this way and that, as casual talk of the kind very often does. Some praised the boy; most blamed him; he was right and he was wrong; and the company parted in an apparently quite unconcerned mood about the essential problem submitted to their wise consideration.

Tearing along the streets in the early afternoon a day or two later, Ali Hamed, who was in one of his most boyishly freakful moods, ran into a stern and venerable gentleman, who was not particularly pleased to have his digestion disturbed by a somewhat rude attack on the centre of his economy.

"You rude, rough, nasty boy! Can't you keep your eyes open, and not charge into your betters?" he exclaimed, grabbing firmly at the urchin's hair.

"I beg your worship's pardon," the boy replied, awe-struck by the formidable-looking personage who addressed him.

"I should think you did beg my pardon, you young ragamuffin! Who are you?"

"Ali Hamed is my name, sir."

"Ali Hamed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is your father a ship's carpenter?"

The Boy and the Stranger

“ Yes, sir.”

“ Ha ! ha ! ha ! Then you are the boy who wants to be rich ?”

For the moment Ali was somewhat taken aback that a man who was a complete stranger to him should tell him what was, indeed, the one absorbing thought of his mind, but knowing no particular reason why he should be ashamed of his ambition in life, or resent its being revealed far and wide, he bravely pulled himself together, and looked every inch the determined purposeful boy he really was.

“ Well, well, my fine little man, you perhaps forget that you have not confirmed the remark I was led to make to you just now. In case you have forgotten, I will ask you more directly, are you the boy who wants to be rich ?”

“ I am, sir.”

“ Have you considered at all how it will be possible for you even to begin your first steps on the road to wealth ?”

“ No, sir. I am just waiting on chance and opportunity.”

“ A very wise answer,” the stranger grunted under his breath ; then speaking more loudly, he added : “ Suppose I were what you call Chance, and gave you the opportunity, would you unhesitatingly take it ?”

The Rusty Key

“ Yes, sir.”

“ But you don’t know me, do you ?”

“ No, sir, I have never seen you before that I can remember.”

“ And yet you would trust me.”

“ You said you were Chance, and could give me Opportunity.”

“ I may be a villain.”

“ You are Chance, and until I know you would betray me, I have no reason to think of you as a villain.”

The stranger muttered much between his teeth that was unintelligible to the boy, who coolly stood by and wondered.

“ Do you know Abdulrahman at the harbour ?”

“ Yes, sir ; they say he’s been very unlucky with his deals of late.”

“ That’s the man ; he wants a boy badly. He cannot pay him much, but there is money to be got in Abdulrahman’s business by a smart fellow who can keep his eyes open, and wait five or ten years. Will you go to him ?”

“ Yes, if you direct me to do so.”

The austere stranger knit his brow as he gazed intently at the boy. For a moment or two his fingers played nervously about the great inkhorn that was thrust like a dagger through his girdle ; then, as if suddenly master-

The Boy and the Stranger

ing an impulse to hesitate, he drew out the brass case, took a well-worn reed-pen from its receptacle, dipped it into the spongy substance that was soaked in ink, and inscribed a few symbols on a short strip of parchment, which he held tightly stretched across the palm of his left hand.

“Take this to Abdulrahman !” he said.

The boy seized the small scroll that was handed to him, and was gaily darting off towards the harbour, when the venerable man called him back.

“You may perhaps want this some day or other. You are very young, and I am growing very old. Who knows what may happen to either of us ?”

And fumbling first in one pocket and fold of his garments and then in another, the worthy person at last produced a rusty little key, which he gave to the boy.

Ali Hamed was highly amused, and more than ever convinced that he was dealing with a crank, but he took the worthless-looking little object, dropped it carelessly into his loose open shirt, and hastened off to assure himself that the whole business was not a joke.

The Rusty Key

II

THE SHOP NEAR THE HARBOUR

Abdulrahman was poring seriously over a great bundle of papers in the gloomy arched recess that was his office.

Ali Hamed had been watching him for a few minutes, hardly knowing how to interrupt the occupations of an evidently much worried man, when the lad realised that a pair of benevolent and mild eyes were wistfully fixed upon him.

"Do you want a job, boy?" asked a kind voice.

"Yes, sir, that's what I have come for."

"Allah be praised! I have put that question to a score of boys, who only ran away when I spoke to them."

"I have been sent to you, sir," Ali Ahmed candidly admitted.

"Sent to me? By whom?"

"I don't know. Perhaps this will tell you." And the boy came forward with the parchment strip that had been given to him.

Abdulrahman looked curiously at it, knit his eyebrows, shook his head dubiously, was about to return it to the boy, but finally pocketed it.

"Don't know—don't know——" he muttered



*"Abdulrahman was poring
over a bundle of papers."*

The Shop near the Harbour

under his breath. "Look here, boy, will you just mind my shop while I go down to the harbour for an hour or so?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you. There will be nothing for you to do, unless a red-faced, big, black-bearded man calls to see me. If he does, tell him I have gone down to his ship."

"Yes, sir."

"Don't attempt to talk to him, and don't let him come in here."

"No, sir."

Abdulrahman had not been gone ten minutes before the boy's curiosity was aroused by his surroundings. There was little to be sure to provoke his inquisitiveness beyond a mass of strangely-worded documents about ships and their cargoes of silk stuffs from India, spices from Arabia, ivory tusks from the African coasts, and slaves from everywhere. He was mildly wondering what kind of business Abdulrahman did, when a rough voice suddenly fell upon his ears.

"Ho ! ho ! boy ! my papers, please !"

Ali Hamed started, but was quick to observe a red face and a black beard.

"Master has taken them down to your ship."

"You're a liar !"

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"He waited for you till he thought you must have forgotten them, and then went down to find you."

"Very strange! Are you sure?"

"Quite. I was particularly engaged to wait for you and tell you this."

"Then you have nothing for me?"

"Nothing, sir."

The man uttered an oath and disappeared.

Ali Hamed was glad to see him go, for he would have been puzzled to know how to act if the rough, uncouth-looking fellow had insisted on discovering for himself whether his "papers," as he called them, were in the office; but the boy's relief was to give place to alarm when hour after hour went by and Abdulrahman did not return.

Evening was setting in; the workers on the busy wharves and quays were passing noisily homewards from loading and unloading ships, fetching and carrying, repairing gear, and patching up sails.

An eerie stillness was beginning to gather on the gradually deserted scene, when a strange-looking man, bending painfully over a crutch, addressed a good-evening to the boy in friendly tones.

"It's a bad evening for me, friend," Ali Hamed retorted impatiently.

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"Why so, my son?"

"Because I don't know what to do."

"What can you expect to do at this time of day but to shut up shop and go home?"

"And if Abdulrahman comes back——"

"Abdulrahman!" the decrepit creature cackled, "Abdulrahman! You take my advice, sonnie, and don't wait for him. He! he! he! Abdulrahman, poor fellow, is tossing about in a rough sea in a ship's hold!"

"But what about this business of his?"

"There's no business to be done to-night!"

"But to-morrow?"

"Never you mind about to-morrow. To-morrow is not to-day. Let me help you to shut up as a sign of goodwill, and when you come down to-morrow morning, who knows? He! he! he! . . ."

Ali Hamed was sorely puzzled for a minute or two whether to accept this sensible proposal or loyally to abide the return of his employer. His hesitation, however, was altogether disregarded, for the man who had been speaking to him had promptly set to work to shut down the place. To his great amazement, too, he was neither a bent nor broken-down looking person, and he seemed to know exactly what had to be done and how to do it.

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Ali Hamed's bed was none of the most comfortable at any time, but he had never slept less peacefully on it than during that particular night. He was tired enough and young enough not to keep sleep waiting long, but, though it steeped his eyelids and drugged his senses, never before had such wild and fantastic visions tormented his rest.

Now he was in a vault surrounded by weird-looking written characters and ciphers, then he was rocking in a ship on a rough sea, with a mass of rusty keys jingling in his ears. Talking to a fearsome pirate, he was suddenly accosted by a benevolent gentleman, who promptly shrivelled up into a gruesome-looking cripple, and, while pity was still struggling against suspicion in his mind, the wretched creature was suddenly transformed into a stalwart man, who juggled amazingly with heavy shop-shutters, rusty keys, dreadful pirates, and benevolent old gentlemen.

"Ugh!" he sighed out loud at last, in an agony of a nightmare, and, violently heaving himself over, woke to find that a new day was dawning.

Glad to have escaped at last from such a bewildering turmoil of ideas, he jumped up, rushed out into the courtyard, and, drawing a bucketful of water from the well, soon

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splashed his eyes wide open and refreshingly cooled his aching temples.

The ship carpenter's household was always early on the move, so that Ali Hamed was able to get down to the harbour without exciting any unusual curiosity at home and before the business of the day had begun in shop and office.

He had been hanging about the shuttered premises of Abdulrahman, wondering whether he should attempt to open them, and if he really could do so by himself, when a cheery voice behind him cried out :

" Ah, here you are, good boy, it was very thoughtful of you not to wait for me last night."

Ali Hamed turned round, and, to his surprise and relief, saw Abdulrahman standing before him.

" Sir," he exclaimed, " can it be you ?"

" Why, yes," was the good-humoured reply, " who else should it be ?"

" But——"

" Well, boy, you seem to be uncommonly disturbed."

Ali Hamed would have tried to be wary as was his wont, but somehow he was compelled to frankness.

Abdulrahman listened to the whole story, seemed to be highly amused by it, and then

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quietly offered to help the boy to open his office.

"You're a handy little fellow ; have you got a job, by any chance ?" he asked, when all was cleared away and made ready for the work of the day.

"No, sir," was the ready reply.

"Will you stay with me, then ?"

"What do you want me to do ?"

"Only to be smart."

"I can but try, I suppose."

"That's it . . . !"

"And if I am not smart . . . ?"

"Well, the best way I can explain what it may mean to you, if you are always as ready as you were yesterday, is this: I can roughly say that by your coming to me when you did, and by your action while in charge here, you saved me at least one hundred gold pieces. In return for that service I will give you five."

Abdulrahman drew a bag from his bosom, and, bidding the astonished boy approach, promptly proceeded to count out five solid gold pieces into the outstretched palm of his hand.

"Mind you," he made haste to add, "it's only just that I should warn you not to expect such a good stroke of business every day. I cannot say when you may be able to bring

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me luck again, but this I will promise: that for every hundred copper, silver, or gold coins you help me to gain I will give you five; and I shall hope for your sake and mine that my gains through you may always be in gold, so that you may derive the greatest benefit from my prosperity. Are you satisfied?"

"Yes, master."

And it was on these terms that the bargain was concluded.

The boy thought little enough about the matter at the time, though he could not help noticing that no one who heard the news of the employment he had found for himself was particularly anxious to congratulate him on it.

As the days and weeks went by, however, he found plenty of opportunity to ponder over the matter, and the conclusions at which he arrived were contradictory enough to puzzle him.

He could never have conceived anything more deadly monotonous than the life he was leading. Shop opened in the early morning, shop shut at sunset, and in between interminable hours of kicking his heels about the shop-front, while his master in its darker recesses was poring over long strips of figure-laden documents. The little excitement that was

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furnished by busy people passing up and down the quays, ships loading and unloading, an occasional dispute within earshot, or a rarer fight amongst the wharf-hands, was soon exhausted; and Ali Hamed was more than once on the point of running away, convinced that here was no scope for his ambition, and that this was the secret of the indifference with which his efforts to establish himself in life had everywhere been hailed. But against all that depressing side of the question was the figure of that patient, laborious man, counting, and counting, and always counting.

True, it was only columns of figures that were being counted, but, as the boy soberly reflected, what else but money could those figures represent? Besides, watch Abdulrahman as he would, there was nothing to indicate that the man was playing a deep game or trying to impose on him or others by a mere show of business and industry. Indeed, things seemed to be all the other way, since for days at a time his strange employer barely recognised the lad's existence, and by many tokens proved himself blissfully unmindful of the fact that he was living in a world of busy men furiously struggling with one another to get the most out of life and the best for themselves into the bargain.

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Buoying himself up with such hope and courage as he could extract from the peculiar circumstances in which he found himself, Ali Hamed had spent a year of loyal but unprofitable service in this idle fashion, when a disturbing idea slowly began to shape itself in his ever active mind.

Abdulrahman was mad !

Worst of all, the deeper he pursued this train of thought the more clearly did it explain the whole mystery which surrounded the man, his transactions, and the kindly but nevertheless guarded attitude of the world in general to his person and his affairs.

Convinced at last that he had really got the clue to all that was so mysterious and inexplicable about the situation, Ali Hamed came down to the harbour one morning firmly resolved that it was to be for the last time in his queer master's service. Abdulrahman was singularly late as it happened, and was wearing such an unusually worried look when he arrived that the boy did not feel it in his heart to vex him at once with the announcement of his departure.

The day was long, he mused ; he would hope for a good opportunity in its course, and meanwhile posted himself in his accustomed place to watch and wait. But the dreary

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routine of figure-casting was for once not to be repeated in spite of all the attempts his master made to settle down quietly ; and in the end, after restlessly fidgeting about, unfolding documents, then refolding them, trimming his reed-pens, emptying and filling his sand-boxes, Abdulrahman put everything neatly away as he did when work was over of an evening, and, coming forward, informed the astonished boy that he was going out on business.

Uncanny though it was to have close dealings with a madman, Ali Hamed, for all his cleverness, was just a child of his time, and had been taught to be considerate to all feebleness, and particularly to reverence the afflicted in mind, partly as an acknowledgment of the inscrutable decrees of Providence which ordains such incapacities, and partly in humble awe of the Divine will which sometimes chose such frail creatures as the ministers of its stern purpose.

Storm and Wreck

III

STORM AND WRECK

The late afternoon sun was lighting up the darker recesses of Abdulrahman's office, where Ali Hamed was squatting on the floor and deeply meditating over what was to become of him, while his eyes were idly wandering round the cave-like place about him—a few shelves here, a nest of drawers there, and cobwebs everywhere! He had either never troubled to look, or must have been unable from his wonted position on the road-level, to get a proper view of his master's surroundings, but once seen the sight utterly appalled him.

Cobwebs!

No wonder people never came on business to such a Paradise of spiders!

Ali Hamed had a natural horror of spiders. They had always been to him an emblem of dirt, decay, and misery. With a leap he was on his feet. Though he would not serve Abdulrahman for another day, mere principle compelled him to rid Abdulrahman of such ill-boding evidences of neglect and ruin.

Never did the boy spend busier hours than while attacking the walls of that grimy vault.

He had blackened his face, hands, and arms,

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and littered the floor with such a collection of spiders' webs that he trod as on a soft carpet, when he was surprised by a peculiar cackle.

"He ! he ! he !"

"What are you giggling at ?" Ali Hamed asked, hardly knowing whether to be pleased or frightened by that well-remembered noise.

"He ! he ! he ! What a mess you are in !"

"You can't expect me to be clean over a job like this, can you ?"

"No, of course not ! He ! he ! he !"

"It's no laughing matter, I can tell you !"

"I quite believe it ; but do you know the time ?"

"Never thought of it."

"Time to shut up shop. He ! he ! he !"

"But what about these cobwebs ?"

"You must clear them up to-morrow. He ! he ! he !"

"I'm not coming back to-morrow."

"You must. He ! he ! he ! It will be dark in half an hour ; you'll never finish to-night and you cannot leave the place in this condition."

And strangely enough, as once before, while he was still speaking the uncouth figure began to put up the shutters.

Here was evidently another madman, whom it would be scarcely wise perhaps to thwart,

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and whether it was too dark to see properly, or whether there was some grim magic about the boy hardly liked to consider, but the cackler certainly did seem to assume very different and very bewildering aspects as he handled the heavy boards and cunningly adjusted them in their place.

Ali Hamed was back at Abdulrahman's office in good time in the morning.

Much to his astonishment, after his previous experience of the cackler, he had neither dreamed dreams nor seen visions, but he slept the heaviest of sweet sleeps.

Altogether heartened and refreshed, he had opened the shop, swept the cobwebs and dust of the place into a heap in a remote corner, and was scooping up the last of the litter with his hands, when he grazed his fingers on something sharp on the floor. Examining the spot more closely, he found what looked like a bit of iron-plating deftly let into the boards, but with a slightly protruding nail in the centre.

He took out his knife to scrape away the fine dust round what he thought was the head of the nail, when he discovered to his surprise the pin of a keyhole.

He jumped to his feet with a sudden and vivid recollection of a man who had once

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given him a rusty key, and was anxiously searching in the bosom of his shirt, among the various odds and ends he carried there, for this almost forgotten trifle, when a stern voice cut short his investigations.

“Hullo, young fellow, it’s you again, is it?”

The speaker was that same great, burly, red-faced and black-bearded man who had once before come to the office for his papers.

Forbidding though the man’s aspect undoubtedly was, Ali Hamed was not sorry to see him, in consideration of the handsome profit he had made out of the ruffian’s previous visit.

“Where is Abdulrahman?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know, you imp of Satan! Do you think you’re going to send me knocking about the high seas for another year or more with your confounded lies?”

Before Ali Hamed could realise what had happened the man had leapt up on to the raised kind of stage that formed the floor of the shop, and had gripped him by the scruff of his neck.

The boy was as plucky as he was high, and furiously set to work to wriggle and hack at the man’s shins, but he was no match for the brawny-armed bully who had got him in tow.

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"Where is Abdulrahman?"

"I don't know, I tell you."

"You are an accursed little liar, and by the Prophet! you shall pay for it!"

There was no mistaking the tone of fiendish rage with which he spoke, and, almost shaking the life out of the boy, much as a dog would have shaken a rat, he hurled him violently into the back of the shop.

Whether he was dead or alive Ali Hamed hardly knew, but, when he came to, he was lying huddled up in the corner of a stuffy kind of place, with a strange sound of water hissing in his ears, and an uncomfortable sensation that he was being heaved up and down.

He was painfully engaged in picking up the clues of memory when he seemed to hear voices about him.

"The little beast is dead!"

"Throw him overboard, then!"

"Not I, Captain," said the first speaker.

"You say he's dead!"

"Ought to be, I should think!"

"Why don't you go and see, you idiot?"

The wretched boy was hardly in a condition to care whether he was thrown overboard or not, but, feeling a kick in his side, he groaned heavily.

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He did not hear what else was said of him, nor suspect how near he came to being sunk fathoms deep in the salt sea waves, but, aching and suffering in every limb of his body, he woke again to consciousness, to find himself lying in a kind of wooden cupboard on a pile of empty sacks. The swishing noise of water and the dreadful feeling of being helplessly rolled to and fro, then intermittently jerked up and down with great violence, soon convinced him that he must be in a ship on a stormy sea.

A mad desire to reach the light and air drove him to struggle as best he could to his feet, but before he could steady himself sufficiently to stagger forward he was sprawling on his back, dazed and helpless. His fall may have only been due to a sudden lurch of the vessel, but it seemed to his overwrought imagination as if he had been pushed back by an invisible hand, and, unless the creaks and groans of boards and timbers labouring heavily under stress of foul weather could have spoken, it was a very human voice by his side which imploringly bade him as he valued life lie still and suffer.

What he was to suffer, alas ! would only be revolting to describe.

Whether it was for hours or days, months

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or years even, that he had been moaning on his heart in a long-drawn agony of physical torment, which was intensified by the wild mental hallucinations, he did not know, but when something like life returned to his tired and exhausted body he was to open his eyes and find himself staring vacantly into a deep mass of intense blue.

Beyond the fact that it was something remembered, part of a great fund of experience accumulated in the past and long dormant in the inmost recesses of his sentient being, disordered and unhinged were his faculties that he merely wondered at the impression produced on him by something he called blue while he asked himself what blue was.

The laborious process by which he might at the end have tediously unravelled the tangled skein of his confused ideas was abruptly disturbed by the sounds of a familiar voice.

"Allah be praised ! He lives ! His eyes are open !" was the eager cry of heartfelt joy that rang in his ears ; and before he could move to ascertain the correctness of his impressions the blue above him was darkened by the shadow of a woebegone, dishevelled and rudely battered human being.

"You speak like Abdulrahman !" he gasped incredulously, after an agonising pause.

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“ You are right, my son, I am Abdulrahman !”

“ But——”

“ Never mind your ‘buts.’ Here, put your lips to this gourd ; take a good draught ; it will revive you.”

There was such tenderness in the tone, such solicitude in the gentle way in which his head was slightly propped up to drink, that Ali Hamed was comforted, and took a deep, long pull at the cordial held to his parched mouth.

“ It is good, master !”

“ That’s right ! Now, if you will but eat this, too, who knows how quickly your strength and spirits may be refreshed and restored ?” And Abdulrahman pressed a soft morsel of food against the boy’s teeth.

Ali Hamed greedily ate it, and yet another and another piece of the same appetising portion.

“ Are you better now, my son ?”

“ Yes, I thank you, but there is a great roaring of water that frightens me.”

“ Raise yourself, if you can, and see !” was the reply, while tender arms slowly lifted the still dazed boy into a sitting posture.

The sight that met his bewildered gaze utterly confused him. He was on a raised ledge of rock above a storm-lashed sea, that

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was sullenly rocking itself to sleep after a mad bout of ill-temper provoked by a furious gale of wind. Wedged in among the cruel and jagged rocks at some distance below him, and washed over at regular intervals by the great waves that were still running high, was a big vessel, lying helplessly on her side, and straining in every balk and timber.

“ Master, speak !”

“ What shall I speak, my son ; there is the beginning, and who knows if it may not also be the end. That ship you see yonder brought us here ; it will never be able to take us back again ; and where we are I don’t know.”

“ But how did we come to be on that ship ?”

- “ You came because it was thought safer to throw you overboard at sea than leave you to be found dead in my shop, and I came because I would sooner be drowned than live without my papers. You will, perhaps, be able to remember sooner or later what happened to you five days ago . . .”

“ Five days ago !” the boy exclaimed, utterly amazed.

“ You may well be astonished, my son. How you have lived through it, I don’t know. Certain it is, however, that but for finding you and for the sparks of life that remained

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in you, I should never have been able to survive that agony of suffering we were to share. Marvellous is the work of Providence, though, but for that awful storm, which threatened to be our undoing, I cannot imagine what would in the end have befallen us. As it was, everybody on that wretched ship was too busy during every minute of those long days and nights to have a thought beyond seeking to avoid the terrible fate that did finally overtake her. Early this morning before it was light the end came. There was an awful crash, and you and I were hurled with great force against the sides of our narrow prison. Had it mercifully not been full of empty sacks our brains must surely have been dashed out. When I came at last to my senses I realised that it was no longer a time to dread the violence of bad men who might seek our hurt, and, hauling you as well as I could on to the deck, was soon struggling with you towards the shore. The rest you and I will never know, but, unless it be all a dream, here we are, and I am speaking to you, and it would seem that you can hear and understand me."

"I hear you, master, and what you say has its meaning, but I have no understanding," Ali Hamed said.

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Abdulrahman brooded for a long space, in a silence that was evidently perturbed by anxious thoughts.

“Ah, my son,” he spoke at length, “all life is a mystery. Years ago I was one of the most prosperous business men in all Balsora, but the pride of success and the hope of gain blinded my eyes to the danger of venturing on doubtful enterprises. Once I became involved in traffic with unscrupulous men, my credit in the markets of Balsora began to wane ; but, being of an obstinate and wilful nature, I persisted in my courses till my friends began to forsake me and my enemies to triumph. In a last desperate attempt to retrieve my fortunes, I staked my all on a mad project to discover the hidden horde of the notorious pirate, Soliman the Sailor, and so fell into the dangerous toils of the owner of the wreck yonder—that same red-faced, black-bearded scoundrel who has brought you and me to this pass, because he sought to play me foul and to rob me of my lawful claims to a great share of the treasure that my money had been furnished to find. Was it for nothing, do you think, that I was wont to while away my tedious hours of unwilling leisure in reckoning up long lists of figures ? If the papers I held

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were to be trusted, I might still be the richest man in all Balsora, and the urgency with which that villain sought to worry me out of those papers gradually confirmed my belief in their value. When he began to find that, discredited, shunned, and pitied, I was no longer able to present myself even in the markets of the city where I had once commanded influence, money, and respect, his attitude towards me began to change. He began to be ill-tempered, high-handed, and finally, menacing. His returns to the harbour became more frequent, and when the last of those who had served me in my prosperity deserted me, I was sore put to it to know how to avoid his visits. Then you came as a godsend to me. To encourage you to stand by me, I paid you those five gold pieces. Ill as I could have afforded it, I would have given you ten if Fortune had favoured you again five days ago, but your cleaning fit was to have the most disastrous consequences ; for when I returned to the shop at sundown, to cackle to you and to help you to shut up for the night, I discovered, to my horror, that my hiding-place had been wrenched open, and that my precious papers were gone. Crazy at my loss, I immediately rushed down to the port, found, as good luck would have it, that

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there had been delay in loading the ship, and, watching my opportunity, sneaked on board in the darkness and commotion. It was not till we were out in the open that I happened to overhear a conversation between the Captain and one of his men, and thus ascertained your fate and your whereabouts. But what need of further words, even if I could speak any more? I was glad a short while ago to know that your innocent blood was not to rest as a further curse on my poor head, but, after all, it seems to me, indeed, as if it would have been better for both of us if we had perished in our agonies than been spared alive in this dreadful plight."

At this point, worn out by the trials and privations he had undergone, Abdul-rahman's voice faltered, and, burying his face in his hands, he began to sob like a child.

"Be comforted, master, be comforted!" cried Ali Hamed, whose young and more sanguine nature could not fail to be stirred to its depths by this pitiful sight of his elder's weakness and emotion.

"There is no comfort for me, my son. If we have been saved from dying in the water, it is that we must perish miserably of hunger and thirst on these desert shores!"

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“And yet, are we not taught that to live is to hope?”

“Hope! What hope can there be for me, my son, without those papers on which all my hopes in this world were founded?”

“But may we not find those papers?”

“They are lost with the man who stole them from me, and how shall we find him when he lies at the bottom of the sea!”

Utterly depressed by Abdulrahman's gloom, Ali Hamed was fain to admit in his heart that the prospect of recovering the valuable documents was indeed beyond human endeavour.

The sun rose higher and began to burn more fiercely while the two sat sadly contemplating the mournful scene of desolation about them and discussed, between long intervals of silence, what was to become of them.

Forced at length to retreat to the shade of a big boulder, they might have pursued the dreary train of thought and speech that had occupied them, if sleep had not stolen unawares upon them and snatched them both away in its soothing embrace.

The Packet of Papers

IV

THE PACKET OF PAPERS

Who shall say what fancies beguiled the rest of the worn-out and exhausted Abdulrahman? But he was wrapped in a deep and deathlike slumber when Ali Hamed awoke after a most thrilling vision of gorgeous splendours and fascinating adventures, to find a stern and somewhat venerable-looking man beckoning him to his side.

Hardly knowing whether he was awake or asleep, the boy cautiously approached to answer the summons addressed to him.

"Have you the key?" demanded the apparition, in solemn tones.

"What key, my lord?" Ali Hamed stammered, with nervous dread.

"The rusty key of Opportunity, which I gave you a year since in the streets of Balsora."

"It is so long ago. . . . I had forgotten all about it! . . ."

"Look and see!" was the curt rejoinder.

The boy dived tremblingly into his bosom, and rummaged anxiously about the unconsidered trifles he was accustomed to stow about his person.

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“Why don’t you loosen your girdle?” came the impatient rebuke.

Abashed at his own stupidity, Ali Hamed quickly freed the cloth about his waist, and sent a curious collection of articles rattling and rolling down on the ground before him. To his intense joy, as he sprang aside to see what had fallen, he discovered a key.

“Is this it?” he inquired, though his heart sank within him as he picked up and timidly proffered a glittering, resplendent little key, very unlike the rusty little object he had received in pledge.

The apparition took it and examined it with minute care.

“Chance has made it very bright, I see!” the mysterious figure remarked, talking as it were to himself. Then the stern expression on his face gradually softened into an odd smile, as he added: “It may be well yet; who knows, boy? The way of Opportunity lies through yonder Gorge of Service; it is black with the guilt of evil men, but there is a way through it for the simple and the brave, and the reward is great. Here is your key!”

Instinctively awed by the presence of this strange person, and overpowered by the portentous nature of his words, Ali Hamed involuntarily sank to his knees, and bowed

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his head, in an attitude of meek reverence. He felt the key being pressed into the palm of his uplifted right hand, and clasped it tightly ; but when he ventured at length to raise his eyes to the giver, the man had vanished.

The boy would have doubted his senses, and believed that he was still in a dream, but for the shining token he held in his hand and the other evidences around him that he was indeed wide awake in a world of hard and dismal facts, which could only be faced with courage and determination.

A glance behind showed Abdulrahman still wrapt in peaceful slumbers. The eager impulse to rush to the sleeper's side, hastily to awake him, and tell him what had happened, was as eagerly restrained by the sober reflection that nothing but the possession of his papers would restore Abdulrahman to the activity of Hope.

Ali Hamed, therefore, checked himself, and dejectedly sat down to consider the situation.

The sea was certainly settling down, but it was still heaving and dashing with remorseless cruelty against the wretched ship that was manacled by the keel on that jagged reef of rock. To reach the wave-battered, swaying hulk was rashly to court death, but,

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with nothing better to do and a mind ill attuned to listlessness, the boy almost unconsciously found himself at the water's edge.

He had tested one slimy rock after another in the desire at length to find a firm footing, when he stumbled upon a sight that made him recoil with loathing from his purpose.

A horribly mangled corpse was lying at his feet !

Ali Hamed did not stop to look again at the gruesome sight before him. He had unexpectedly come face to face with something which instinctively repelled curiosity and filled him at the same time with so terrible a fear that he was not ashamed to run away from the horror with all the speed his young legs could carry him.

Meanwhile Abdulrahman, roused at last from his long sleep, had sat up, and was soon lost in wonder and perplexity at finding himself alone.

"Whatever can have happened to the boy?" he asked himself anxiously, after calling aloud for the lad to all the four winds. Misgivings that the youngster might have come by some harm slowly arose to torment his mind, till, filled with despair at the

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awful prospect which the loss of the boy unfolded to his senses, he started to his feet, and, glaring distractedly about him, wildly invoked the return of the sole comfort and support of his life.

"Here I am, master, here I am!" rang at last the distant response to the piteous cries which had been rending the air; and, looking in the direction whence the welcome sounds proceeded, the frenzied man saw a fleet-footed figure speeding towards him.

"Heaven be praised, my son!" Abdulrahman exclaimed, as he rushed forward to receive the panting boy in his open arms and to press him fervently to his breast—"Heaven be praised! Had you tarried a few moments longer, I would verily have dashed my head against those rocks. But where have you been and what ails you?" he added, realising how excited and overcome Ali Hamed was.

"Master . . . down there . . . by that dark patch . . . a man . . . dead!" was the gasping reply.

"Many men should be dead down there, my son, if we two are the only ones alive out of that ship."

"But, master . . . a black beard . . . red face. . . ."

"I care nought now that I have got you!"

The Rusty Key

“Your papers, perhaps . . . master !”

“Of what solace shall my papers be in this wilderness here, where I want but you ?”

“You would surely not trifle with opportunity ?”

“Boy ! What was that you said ?”

The question was asked in a tone of voice so severe that Ali Hamed recoiled with dismay from an embrace which seemed to have been suddenly relaxed.

For a brief second Youth and Age confronted one another in an attitude of distrust and suspicion.

Abdulrahman was the first to speak.

“I will go, my son, if you will promise that, whatever betides, you will be true to me.”

“I swear it, master !”

“Bless you, boy, and may Allah preserve you in safety till I return.

Left alone in his turn, Ali Hamed fell a prey to thoughts so hideous and disturbing that they would soon have rendered life unendurable for him, if his waiting, watching eyes had not at last seen Abdulrahman approaching him with weary steps. As his companion drew nearer, the boy was able to note the livid colour of his face, the nervous twitchings

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of his features, and the panic-stricken look of terror in his protruding eyes.

"Oh, why did I go! Why did I go!" he exclaimed, staggering up to the alarmed youngster.

"For your papers, master," was the faltering reply.

"My papers! Here they are, soaked through and through with salt water, and absolutely useless. They were accursed before; they are doubly accursed to me now, for what it has cost me to save them from the cruel grasp of Death!"

With a frenzied gesture he produced the sodden documents from the folds of the broad sleeve in which he had knotted them, and, with a cry of pain, he cast them at the boy's feet, and collapsed, weeping and sobbing, on the sand.

Dumbfounded in the presence of such overwhelming grief, Ali Hamed was too stunned for a while to speak or move.

When something like energy returned to his affrighted senses, he quietly stooped down, picked the offending packet up, thrust it, wet and clammy, into his bosom, and gradually found the courage to bend down and soothingly to address the poor moaning creature before him.

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“ Rise, master, rise !” he implored, as soon as it appeared that his consoling ministrations were having the effect of quieting Abdulrahman.

It was some time, however, before the man would consent to stand up, and it was not without the greatest difficulty that the boy was able to prop him up and direct his limp and quivering steps towards the gorge which the mysterious apparition had indicated as the direction in which escape lay.

Valiantly the brave little fellow struggled on, though every muscle and fibre in his body were groaning for relief from the burden of supporting the heavy frame of his master. But he had sworn not to forsake Abdulrahman, and his own soul had told him that he dared not forsake him, so that not till the sun had gone down and the task of pressing forwards became hopeless, did the lad finally stop and tenderly guide the tottering form he was bearing to a couch on a sparse patch of dry grass.

There Abdulrahman lay, utterly exhausted and almost lifeless indeed but for the deep spasms of breath which he laboriously fetched at intervals.

How long Ali Hamed sat guarding his prone companion, now yielding to terror, then

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bracing himself against despair, he did not know. As the tedious watch in the darkness was prolonged, his troubled thoughts grew more restful, his eyes became heavy, and he was just dosing off when a sharp pain at his side stabbed him to consciousness.

It was some time before his scattered senses were sufficiently composed to enable him to realise that the strange brightness which threw the rugged landscape about him into bold relief came from a moon shining peacefully in a sky of intense blue. But the majestic awe with which the scene inspired him was unpleasantly cut short by a rather keen stab in his side. Instinctively directing his hand to the affected spot, his fingers touched something wet, cold, and clammy.

"It's those papers!" he mentally ejaculated, and, plunging into his bosom, he withdrew the offending cause of his discomfort.

For a moment he was angrily tempted to throw the packet away, for was it not the cause of all his sufferings, and had not Abdulrahman truly called it accursed?

Thoughtless haste was not, however, one of his characteristics, and, catching sight of his master's broad sleeves, he quietly bound up the wet documents in the loose folds of the nearest of them.

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“ They will not harm him there,” he mused, with great inward satisfaction. “ That’s where he himself stowed the wet things away; and, after all, what do I know about these papers, or of what concern are they to me ?”

He would have settled down to peaceful repose again if another quick twinge at his side had not made him start with a low cry. As he pressed his hand to the aching spot, his fingers came in contact with a hard substance.

“ It’s my key !” was the disturbing thought that flashed upon him. In a moment he had produced the little object. It should have been bright and glittering as he held it in his open palm for the moon’s rays to play upon it, but, look at it as he would, it remained dull and indistinct.

“ How rusty it is !” came a low voice.

“ I was foolish enough to put a wet thing into my bosom,” the boy replied, though he was quite uncertain whether he had actually been spoken to or was merely the victim of his own fancies.

“ Pity ! Pity ! Salt water takes such a long time to dry !”

Ali Hamed looked up at these words, but all he saw was a sort of filmy vapour slowly resolving itself into nothingness.

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The vision had been so strange, and the impression it left on the boy's mind so fraught with misgiving, that once again he fell on his knees, and humbly covered his eyes with his hands.

He had continued thus for a long space, in dread expectation of a calamity that did not come, when his posture at length stirred prayer to his lips.

He had often prayed before, but never had his whole heart been lifted up in such fervency of supplication as when he implored the Great Spirit of Help to release him from the paralyzing and soul-destroying spell of inactivity to which the sleeping form by his side condemned him.

Rather than endure further torments in these haunted solitudes, he beseechingly craved for toil and suffering, weariness of flesh, and all the miseries of physical exhaustion.

The paling light of the moon had blushed into the rose-hued tints of morn without Ali Hamed perceiving its change.

Not till the restless groans of the waking Abdulrahman grew louder and louder did the rapt boy rouse himself sufficiently to find that the sun of a new day was already riding high in the heavens.

The Rusty Key

V

THE GORGE OF SERVICE

There was much to explain and a good deal more to be left unexplained, before Abdulrahman could finally be coaxed to rise. No sooner did he realise, however, that it was Ali Hamed's purpose to lead him into the dismal gorge, whose steep and frowning walls threatened to fall in and crush them, than the old man's spirits sank within him, and, though he tottered along on quaking knees, for a while, he soon sank to the ground, and loudly began to waken the echoes of the solitude with his lamentations of distress.

"Leave me, my son, leave me ! Let me die here ! I cannot follow you !" were the first coherent words he uttered.

"Then we will die together, master !" the boy stoutly replied.

"Not so ! Are you not young ? Life is all before you. Difficulties and dangers should not daunt you !"

"They do not, but I have sworn not to forsake you !"

"I absolve you from your oath !"

"You cannot, master !"

"It was wrongfully exacted. I was a

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coward, and I have sinned. Go, my son ; you are free !”

“ I can only go with you !”

“ But don’t you see what a feeble, broken-down old man I am ?”

“ I see nothing but my duty to stand by you.”

“ Would you kill me, by bidding me do what I cannot ?”

“ I am here to help you, master. If the reward is to be death, there is the consolation that we shall die together !”

“ How shall I bear the guilt of your innocent blood ?”

“ You will certainly have to bear it, if you condemn me to court death here in fulfilment of my vow to abide by you, whereas, if you let yourself be persuaded by me to go forward and evil befalls us, the guilt will be mine.”

Abdulrahman groaned heavily.

“ May Allah be merciful to me !” he exclaimed at last, twitching convulsively in an attempt to raise himself.

“ Let me support you !” the boy cried eagerly, as he stooped to aid his master’s vain efforts to get up.

The task proved more difficult than Ali Hamed had anticipated, and, when it was accomplished, he realised with a shock of

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horror that Abdulrahman had not only lost the free use of his limbs, but that he was blind.

How slow and toilsome the daily progress through the rugged, forbidding, and ever-narrowing gorge was to be under such trying circumstances can better be imagined than described !

Pity and reverence forbade any allusion to the afflicted man's infirmities, though the strain of appearing always cheerful and light-hearted became more wearing and more forced as the onward stages grew shorter and shorter each succeeding day.

Flesh and blood at length reached the limit of their endurance. A day, more awful than any that the boy had been called upon to struggle through manfully, had come to an end, and, absolutely exhausted, he had not even had the strength to lay his burden down softly, as was his wont, but had staggered and fallen heavily with it to the ground. He had certainly done his best to save Abdulrahman's body, at the expense of his own, from too rude an impact with the stone-strewn path, but he was hardly prepared to hear no scoldings from his petulant, ever whining and often ill-tempered master.

For once, indeed, the poor man was strangely quiet and resigned ; and, lulled



*"Through the
rugged gorge."*

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by the blissful peace, Ali Hamed was glad to lie still and enjoy the repose he so much needed.

An oppressive sense of weight roused him at length from his lethargy, but, although he deftly managed to wriggle himself from beneath Abdulrahman's prostrate form, the relief he thus gained was only to prove temporary.

He was wondering, in a half-dazed condition, what the cause of his discomfort could be, when his hands, instinctively passed up and down his body, came into contact with something stiff that was lying on his chest. He gripped the thing boldly, to cast it from him, but it was like lead to his touch, and he was forced to use violence with himself before he could raise himself sufficiently to ascertain what it could possibly be.

"Those awful papers!" he was muttering under his breath.

"Put them into your own bosom, boy!" said a clear voice close to him.

Ali Hamed obediently dropped the bundle into the loose folds of his shirt. It felt warm to his skin, and soon made him glow all over with an invigorating sense of relief and strength.

"The key will not rust this time!"

Was the remark a mere audible reflection

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of his own, or had it been whispered by the same mysterious voice that had previously addressed him.

Certain it was that he had again forgotten all about the key, and, starting up in great consternation of mind, he began to search the recesses round his waist.

To his joy he soon came upon something hard, that had lodged itself near the small of his back, but which, in the sportive fashion inanimate objects often display, persisted in eluding his hurried efforts to capture it.

Though he was amused at first by the comicality of the proceedings, the joke soon began to tire him, and he impatiently clutched at the back of his girdle, pulled it away from his body, and had the satisfaction of hearing the key fall with a ring on the stones.

He skipped round hastily, and bent down to pick it up, but he had forgotten how rough the ground was, and, look where he would, no key was to be seen.

Groping carefully about on hands and knees, with the sweat of fear and excitement dripping from his brow, he was driven at last to despair of finding it in the dark, when a strangely soft, yet penetrating kind of light began gradually to suffuse the scene. In its glow he detected a glittering object

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wedged in a treacherous crevice of the rocks at his feet.

It required all the dexterity of his fingers to dislodge it, and when dislodged to prevent it from dropping back out of his reach altogether; but he did laboriously manage to bring it to the surface, and was triumphantly examining it on the palm of his outstretched hand.

“How very bright it is! It looks as if it ought to burn, but it does not!” he exclaimed.

Nevertheless, a burning there was soon to be about his loins, which grew to be unbearable, until he recollected the packet of papers, and jerked the bundle out of his bosom.

There was no trouble about locating where that fell, and, to his intense surprise, the parcel was neither smouldering nor aflame.

He looked askance at it for some minutes, cautiously touched it, was not scorched by it, and, after much deliberation, was emboldened to seize it pluckily, and by unwrapping it to discover, if so he might, the source of its latent heat.

“Allah be praised! I am saved, my son. How shall I thank you? He! he! he!”

The boy looked up, and, to his utter amazement, saw Abdulrahman standing erect and self-confident before him.

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“ Master ! This is magic ! ”

“ Quick, boy ! Look ! Is it not written, an overhanging cliff, ten paces to the right of the Rock of Difficulty, a smooth-faced wall, a stone door . . . ”

Ali Hamed would have verified the statement, but the papers shrivelled into ashes in his gasp.

“ Never mind. I know every word by heart. He ! he ! he ! Was it for nothing I was given years of patient toil to study them ? Ten paces to the right . . . stay where you are, son, while I measure them. ”

“ Here it is, smooth as glass . . . ”

Abdulrahman was pushing and straining forward, when the boy at last rushed to his help.

“ Wait, master, wait ! The door is locked ! ”

“ Locked ! Say not so, for then we are verily undone ! ”

“ Maybe I have the key ! ” Ali Hamed urged, and, sure enough, after much diligent search, a little keyhole was found which the boy's bright trophy not only helped to reveal, but was found to fit.

Once again the eye of man was to behold the treasure-caves of the notorious Soliman, the legendary hero of many a fine romance in the story of Balsora.

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A priceless horde of silver was succeeded by a glittering mine of gold, but the dazzling splendour of the precious stones beyond was too blinding to be borne long by the gaze of two such exhausted and astounded creatures as Ali Hamed and his master.

They had slowly worked their way back to the open air, and were mutely staring at one another in a state of helpless confusion as to what they should do, when Abdulrahman shrank back with a wild gesture of alarm.

"What ails you, master?" the boy cried anxiously.

"Speak again! The voice is yours, but . . ."

"Well, but what . . . ?"

"How changed you are, if it really is you! You were a mere boy a little while ago, and now you are a man."

"No, no; it is your imagination."

"Put your hand to your face, look down at your body, test the muscles of your arms!"

Ali Hamed nervously complied with these injunctions, and was forced to marvel at the extraordinary changes in himself. It seemed but as yesterday since the great adventure of his life had taken place, and here he stood, visibly transformed in mind and person as

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though years of toil and effort had rolled over him.

Convinced at last that he was not the victim of a vain fancy, he turned to look more closely at Abdulrahman.

A little heap of huddled up mortality was lying at his feet.

He called aloud, and madly implored his master to speak, but all to no purpose.

Then, with hot tears of sorrow streaming down his cheeks, and a heart wrung by sadness and misery, he stooped down to seek confirmation of the dread impressions that beset him.

A weary, long-drawn sigh rewarded his efforts to ease the last grim sufferings of the dying man, and then all was dark and still.

Master and boy lay side by side, and there was an end of all things for Ali Hamed in the proud vigour of his newly acquired manhood and for the worn-out frame of the hapless Abdulrahman.

* * * * *

The gates of Balsora were shutting for the night, when a weary, travel-stained youth pressed through with the last batch of arrivals, who were eagerly struggling in order to avoid the payment of

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backshish to the insatiable guards stationed at the doorway.

Though the city outwardly slept as quietly as usual that night, there was some commotion in the humble home of one of its most respected inhabitants, for a long-lost son, who had much to explain before he was freely admitted to the family circle, had suddenly appeared to claim his own kith and kin, and to bring joy and gladness to hearts that had sadly mourned over his disappearance.

A long-deserted and much neglected shop at the quay was once more to be swept and garnished, and steadily to become the busiest meeting-place of every trader at the thriving port.

Ali Hamed could never have found his way back to the treasure stores of Soliman the Sailor, but silver and gold and precious stones beyond the dreams of avarice poured into his coffers, and his name became famous in all the East for just and righteous dealing, scrupulous honesty, and a heart of pity for his less fortunate or perhaps less deserving fellow-men.

As for the little key, it was some time before Ali Hamed ceased to live in dread of the consequences that might befall him for having lost it at some stage of his hurried, homeward journey to Balsora.

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The years passed peacefully by, however, with no disturbing visions to alarm him, and thus comforted and reassured, he slowly began to understand the hidden meaning of the insignificant symbol that had been so mysteriously entrusted to him.

The chance that daily lurks about men's steps gives one and all of us the opportunity of satisfying our chief ambitions. These ambitions may not always be the highest or the best, but they may always be purified, and thus rendered possible of accomplishment by steady purpose, whole-hearted devotion, and cheerful readiness at all times to accept the least promising and most difficult conditions of hard and active service.

Thus alone can the rusty surface of mere vague longings be burnished into the bright treasures of Success and Happiness.

THE END

